THE LONG TRAIL BOYS at SWEET WATER RANCH

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Robert
from
Junior Moseley

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THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE LONG TRAIL BOYS AT SWEET WATER RANCH

KENT STARED AT THE WHITE GUSH OF ROARING WATER

THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE LONG TRAIL BOYS AT SWEET WATER RANCH

OR THE MYSTERY OF WHITE SHADOW

BY
DALE WILKINS

ILLUSTRATED BY
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CHAPTER I

Westward Bound

"THREE more hours yet! Hope old Hal's right on the dot to meet me." Kent Sherwood's blue eyes gleamed happy anticipation as he put away his watch. It was now one o'clock in the afternoon. Four o'clock would see his long journey across continent ended at High Ledge, the little Nevada town nearest to Sweet Water Ranch, his destination.

It had been the longest and most interesting journey Kent had ever made. From Chicago on he had been in a state of pleasant excitement over the wonders of the wide West as they unrolled before his unaccustomed gaze. Now he was beginning to grow a little weary of just seeing new things. He burned to become a part of this strange, majestic panorama of plain, forest, canyon and snow-capped mountain. It seemed a very long time since he had said good-bye to his Aunt Edith, his only living relative, and left the

little old New England town of Girton behind for the golden West.

"Feel as though I'd been cooped up in this Pullman for a year." Kent stretched himself luxuriously, then glanced idly about the car. "Hello! There's a new face in this car. I didn't see that fellow here yesterday. He must have climbed aboard last night. First chap I've seen near my age. I'd certainly brace over to him for a talk, but he looks like an awful grouch. He might snap at me."

Kent grinned at his own far-fetched conceit. His expression became almost wistful as he continued to eye the lowering-browed youth in the seat directly across the aisle. He did wish someone to talk to.

The boy Kent had just spied sat hunched in his seat, hands in pockets, cap drawn low over his eyes. He stared straight ahead, a deep scowl on his forehead. He had brown eyes and regular features; was as tall and broad-shouldered as Kent, who stood five feet ten in running shoes. He would have been very good-looking save for his sullen, drooping lips and glum expression.

He presently straightened up, removed his hands from his pockets and busied himself

with a time-table. It held his attention briefly. He flung it to the seat beside him with an impatient flip which whisked it across the aisle and into Kent's lap.

"Here you are." Kent leaned across the aisle and returned the time-table to the other. He smiled in his open, genial fashion.

"Much obliged." The dark-eyed boy's sullen features lightened a trifle.

"Care if I come over and sit beside you?" Without waiting for an answer Kent changed his seat. "A fellow gets pretty tired of himself on a long trip like this. I'm all the way from New England. You got on the train last night, didn't you?"

The stranger edged away from Kent, regarding him with sharp, silent suspicion. Kent's pleasant face with its bright blue eyes, square chin and strong, humorous mouth appeared to reassure him against his will.

"I don't belong in the East," he said slowly, ignoring Kent's question.

"Nor I in the West," Kent came back cheerfully. "I am on my way to visit my chum. Sweet Water Ranch is the name of his father's place. It is a whopping big ranch. I can hardly wait till I get there."

His companion received these remarks in

stolid silence. Kent began to feel uncomfortable. He tried hard to think of something else to say. He wished now that he had not been quite so ready to "brace" this sulky stranger. He was a "grouch" and no mistake about it. He certainly did not intend to hurt himself talking. Now that he had started, Kent resolved not to be snubbed.

"Since you are a Westerner, I suppose you can ride most any kind of horse going," was his next venture.

"I can ride," was the short answer. There was another long moment of silence, then the stranger spoke again. "I'm not like you. I've always had to work. I spent one summer on a ranch. That's when I learned to ride." There was a dreary bitterness in his tones that made Kent feel sorry for him, though he did not know why.

"I'm not much of a rider—yet," Kent said with a short laugh. "I can stay on a horse's back. That's about all. I want to learn to ride a bronch; a fiery one. Don't know what'll happen to me, but I'm going to have a try at it. My chum has a dandy horse—Silverheels. His father has a stable full of thoroughbreds. I'd like to break a bronch. Of course I shan't be able to do that for a long while. But some day—oh, wait!"

"You'll have your hands full when you start broncho-busting." The first shadow of a smile visited the brown-eyed youth's face. "Bronchs are terrors, unless you've been brought up to handle 'em. Even then, a bronch will keep you guessing as to what he'll do to you when you try to ride him."

"That's what my chum says," nodded Kent. "He knows horses. The Brents are real Westerners. Hal's great-grandfather, John Brent, staked off Sweet Water Ranch long before the California gold rush in '49. Hal's father is John Brent, III."

Kent gave this information with evident pride. It seemed very wonderful to him that the first John Brent should have been one of the pioneers of the far West. His companion listened without comment. He could not have been interested, for he suddenly said with abrupt irrelevance, "Have you ever been to college?"

"Not yet. Hal and I were graduated from Emerson, a prep school, in June. We're to enter Yale this fall." Kent felt half-vexed at the fact of the other's lack of interest in the Brents.

"A prep school isn't much different from a college, is it?" doggedly pursued his questioner.

"Not a great deal." Kent shook off his brief touch of vexation. Here was something that evidently interested his new acquaintance. He good naturedly added a lively little description of Emerson, for the other boy's benefit. "If *that's* what he'd rather talk about," was Kent's thought, "I might as well try to please him. He doesn't look as though folks had been very good to him."

His interest aroused at last, the stranger asked question after question regarding Emerson, prep schools and matters collegiate. Kent answered with the same signal good humor, glad to have a traveling companion at last, even though the journey was so nearly done.

"I'd better slide over to my seat and get my suit-case," he said, after an hour had passed. "Then I'll be sure not to walk off without it when my station's reached."

He returned to his own place long enough to secure his suit-case and a bundle of magazines which he had bought along the way. These last he offered to the other boy, who accepted them with a flash of eagerness.

"I'd rather read than do anything else," he said gratefully. "I've not had much time, or many books. I'll be glad to read them

later." He stowed the magazines in one end of his own suit-case.

"Where do you get off?" Kent inquired casually as he again settled himself in the seat beside his companion.

The disfiguring scowl, temporarily lifted from the stranger's brows, returned in a twinkling. He was once again the picture of dark suspicion. "Why do you want to know?" he asked rudely. "What difference—" He paused, looking rather shame-faced at his churlish behavior.

"Whew! Excuse me!" Kent whistled softly in comical dismay. "That was a cold blast!"

"Well—what can you—? See here. Why do you want to know where I am going to get off? Have you any special reason for wanting to know?"

Kent stared at the other boy in blank amazement. "No, I haven't," he replied with bluntness. "I don't want to know your business. I've enough to do to tend to my own."

"Humph! No; I guess you *are* all right. You act straight. Are you?"

"The fellows at home and school say so. I hope I am." Kent spoke almost humbly. He reddened at having to commend himself.

"I don't know your kind of fellows," was

the somewhat ungracious rejoinder. "I've only known a few boys; all farm hands. I never liked any of them. They were—"

The sudden high, desperate screech of a whistle ahead cut short his speech. That frantic blast of warning meant immediate danger.

"What's gone wrong, I—" Kent began. His voice was drowned in the noise.

Followed a terrific crash; a dull deafening roar. On the heels of it came the lesser crashing, splintering and snapping of wood and the jingle of breaking glass. The car rocked wildly on the rails. Kent was flung out of his seat as by a giant hand. He landed with cruel force against the seat opposite. He clapped his right hand to his left shoulder, uttering a quick cry of pain. He heard hoarse shouts mingled with the shrill, terrified screams of women.

He had no very clear recollection of what happened within the next four or five minutes. Partially stunned from the jolting he had received, he came gradually to a relieved knowledge that the car he was in had not left the rails. It now stood upright and steady upon them. The sickening swaying and jolting had ceased. Kent continued ruefully to

rub his injured arm. It was bruised from shoulder to elbow. Still he managed to pull himself up to the seat so that he could poke his head from one of the now glassless windows.

He could make out up ahead what he took to be the wreck of the engine and several of the day coaches. They were piled up at a point only a few feet below the level of the roadbed. Part of the train had left the rails. The car he was in, the one behind it and the observation car had stood their ground.

Kent breathed thankfulness at his own miraculous escape. He next thought of his recent acquaintance. He hastily withdrew his head from the window and began looking about for the stranger. He hoped the other boy had not been hurt. Up and down the car, passengers were pulling themselves together with more or less suffering. No one of them had escaped bruises and severe shock.

"That's queer." Kent had expected to find the other boy within a few feet of himself. He saw no sign of him. He made a hasty survey of the car. Next he got to his feet and started down the aisle on a hunt for the dark-eyed stranger. He was not to be found in that car.

Kent slowly made his way back to the seat

they had occupied. He stared down at it in sudden, unbelieving perplexity. Not only had the other boy disappeared. In spite of the disrupting shock of train wreck he had managed, in vanishing, to take his suit-case with him.

CHAPTER II

A Surprise for Kent

"OH, you Emerson fellow! Emerson, Emerson! Rah, rah, rah! Who are we? Who are we? E-m-e-r-s-o-n—That's us!"

This vigorous salutation, shouted at the top of a pair of boyish lungs, greeted Kent Sherwood at six o'clock that evening as he dashed recklessly down the steps of a made-up train that stopped at High Ledge. The yells proceeded from the wide-open mouth of Hal Brent. Hal had caught sight of Kent the instant he had appeared on the train steps.

"Hey, you wild and woolly sheep-herder!" Kent darted across the narrow platform, his fair face aglow. "Who'd you say you were? Emerson? Oh, wow!"

"Great Judas Priest, I'm glad you're safe! Got down here at four-thirty. Heard about the smash! Bing! I was all fussed up for fear you'd been hurt. The S. M. said your train slam-banged into a switch engine. He

said there'd be a made-up train at six. I hoped you'd be on it, O. K."

Hal continued to shake Kent's hand as though he never intended to let it drop. He was a tall, slender youngster with a dark, mischievous face and twinkling golden-brown eyes. Now he fairly radiated gleeful thankfulness at the safe arrival of his chum. He pranced about him joyfully, like a frisky young puppy. A very tall, tousle-headed lad with a broad, humorous countenance trundled a huge baggage truck past the reunited chums, grinning his appreciation of the noisy reunion.

"Hello, George!" called out Hal. "Stop your gay band wagon for a minute and view one of the heroes of the wreck on the Peerless Smash-em and into the Ditch Railroad. Name of the hero, Kent Sherwood. Such a sweet boy!"

Hal adopted a gushing tone and smirked at George. The latter returned the smirk with one equally extravagant.

"Glad to know you." George straightened his comedy features and shook hands heartily. "My last name's Davis. Hal forgot to tell you. I let him call me George. I'm thinking of making him say Mister Davis, though."

"Hope you won't go crazy thinking about

it," flung back Hal. "Say, what's the matter with your old road that the trains can't stay on the tracks?"

"Blame the guys that run the trains, not a humble baggage smasher. Well, duty's duty. There it looms before me." George pointed to a telescope, two suit-cases and a steamer trunk, all laid flat on his truck. "I've a high and lofty load to-day. Glad to have met you, Sherwood. See you fellows again some time."

He twisted his wide mouth derisively at Hal, started his truck with an energetic jerk and went on down the platform whistling.

"I guess you *will* see us again," shouted Hal after him. "He's a fine chap." Hal turned to Kent. "I wanted you to meet him, right off the bat. I hardly ever see him unless I come down here. Had him at Sweet Water for his vacation last summer. We had a bully time. My, but I'm glad to see *you*, Emersonite! I nearly turned inside out when I heard about the wreck."

"Well, I slid through it with nothing worse than a few bruises. I heard the engineers of both engines were killed and one of the firemen. I don't believe many passengers were killed, but a lot were injured. They

made up a train promptly. I was afraid I wouldn't get here before to-morrow."

Kent went on at some length with the details of the wreck. Before his train had been made up he had learned all there was to be learned concerning the disaster.

"Oh, Kent, maybe I haven't a plan that will dazzle you!" cried Hal as he led the way to where he had a pony trap waiting. "If Father sees it same as I do, then we are going on some jaunt, I can promise you. You'll like to hang around the ranch for a week or so. After that—" Hal paused, his eyes sparkling. "How would you take to a pony trip through the mountains? Some little idea. What?" he demanded with bubbling enthusiasm.

"Great!" Kent echoed. "Only I'm not much of a rider. You'd have to furnish me with a tame old nag for a mount."

"Nothing doing," disagreed Hal. "You can jump up the ladder as a rider in a couple of weeks, if you *keep at it*. Our ponies are full of ginger, but gentle for all that. Old Whirlwind's a hummer. He's dad's precious pet. Maybe *he* isn't a wicked brute. I never tried to ride him but once. I stayed on his back about three minutes and then sailed

straight over his head. I landed on the ground like a sack of coal and walked lame for a week afterward."

"I wouldn't mind being thrown once or twice, if I mastered my horse in the long run." Kent's blue eyes glinted determination.

"Once was my limit. Tony can ride Whirlwind. He's the only one besides Dad who can. Tony's a Mexican boy on our ranch. He's a cross between a good sport and a Spanish don. He's eighteen; six feet two inches; born in Mexico. His folks came from Spain. He can ride! Umm! I like him 'most as well as you. His real name's Antonio Sebastian Valdez. Oh, Tony's a star, and no mistake."

"I'll be glad to know him." Whoever Hal liked Kent was sure to approve.

"Certainly you will. Oh, gee! I've a lot to tell you. Never mind. You're going to stay all summer. You'll have time to hear it all. Climb up now and away we go." Hal motioned his chum toward the trap. The pony, a warm brown color with a white face, threw up his head and neighed his pleasure as his master patted his silky nose. "This is a good little horse," Hal continued. "He's seven years old, but he has lots of pep. Haven't you, Sinbad?"

Again the pony sent up a shrill neigh of understanding. Kent stroked the glossy head, then climbed to the high seat of the trap. Hal was instantly up beside him and they had soon left the station behind them.

Sweet Water Ranch was about fifteen miles from High Ledge. It began almost in a valley, stretching gradually upland toward the west until its western confines appeared to merge into the base of the mountain range behind it. It was wider, from north to south, than long, from east to west. On its grassy slopes toward the north grazed thousands of sheep. Almost through the center of the great ranch flowed a stream of clear, sparkling water. From this stream the ranch had taken its name.

"Believe me, this is one happy day," declared Hal jubilantly as he urged Sinbad to "hit up a swift pace, old boy."

"You've said it," Kent agreed, his face reflecting his chum's happiness.

"We've quite a ride ahead of us, but we'll make it by daylight. Sinbad's glad to be out of the corral. We could make faster time with my roadster, but not over this road. Such rough trails are not for buzz wagons. Dad keeps two cars at Carson City. His business

offices are there. We've a big garage on the ranch with cars and trucks in it and motorcycles, too. You'd be surprised to see the amount of ranch work that's done by the men on motorcycles. They are useful old noise boxes. What *I* like is to ride horseback. It makes a fellow feel as though the cowboy West was still on the job."

Thus Hal rattled on as he drove through the sleepy little town of High Ledge, basking in the golden rays of the fast dropping sun. Soon they had passed out of it and were on the road to the ranch. It was smooth but narrow, hardly more than a broad trail. It wound in and out, among grassy hillocks, entered and passed through, or skirted, bits of spicy-scented woodland or touched towering hills, their tops crowned with close growths of birch, poplar, alder and oak. It just missed ravines, rocky and steep enough to cause Kent a slight dizziness as he peered into their shadowy depths. He felt privately ashamed of this sign of weakness and resolved to conquer it.

"What sort of trip out did you have—I mean before the wreck?" Hal presently asked.

"Very quiet. I was disappointed. I had been hoping for a little excitement. Then

the switch engine handed us a wallop and that was more excitement than I wanted."

"Maybe I didn't have a lively trip home in June! Oh, my, but it was a hummer! A wash-out this side of Denver held us up for a day, then a bandit, a real one, got busy on the Utah border and tried to hold us up some more. After that little affair we smashed up the advertising car of a circus. How was all that for excitement?"

"Glorious. You beat me a mile. How can one man get up the nerve to tackle a whole trainload of people and hold 'em up? I've read about 'em, but those tales never seem real." Kent shook his head skeptically.

"Well, you have to believe it now, because it happened on the very train I was on. Some of the slickest bandits have walked away with the trick, but it's a lot harder to do than it used to be. People are live ones these days. Passengers will turn in and mob a gang of bandits now, instead of just looking meek and holding up their hands. The guy who held up our train didn't get away with it. Two traveling men jumped him in the face of his guns and laid him out. I hung out the window and nearly yowled my head off. I'd have been *right in the game*, too, but the idiot

of a brakeman had the doors of our car locked before I could get to either of them."

From the subject of bandits the two boys drifted from one topic to another of interest to themselves. Sinbad kept up his lively pace, his hard little hoofs clattering over the road as he picked a light, sure course. It still lacked a little of a late twilight when Kent's interested eyes followed the pointing of Hal's index finger.

"That's us!" he proudly called out. "That's Sweet Water Ranch! See our humble shack." He nodded toward the ranch house, half hidden in a grove of giant trees. It was almost square in outline and gleamed white through the dark green foliage of the sentinel trees.

"How far are we from it?" Kent asked.

"Oh, a little more than a mile. You can't tell much about it until you are closer to it. It's a bully old shack. Has a big patio, with flowers and trees planted in it and there's a peach of a fountain. The patio is my speed whenever I'm around the house. I'm not around often. I go all over the ranch and hob-nob with the different foremen. I was away over to the extreme west end yesterday hanging around with Jenkins and his gang.

Jenkins looks after the growing end of the stuff we use for winter feed for our menagerie. That's what I call the live stock."

"It's a great life, isn't it?" Kent spoke with admiring warmth.

"You're right it is. I'm going to show you a good time this summer, old top. See those mountains?" Hal pointed toward the east. "They're what I'm aiming for. I've never been farther up them than a rise or so above the foothills. Shy Beaver, an old Indian I know, says we can't ride the ponies all the way up them. I know we can. I asked him to go with us as guide, but he couldn't see it. He says the spirit of White Shadow's great-grandfather, who was a mighty chief, lives there and mustn't be disturbed. White Shadow is a chief, and a winner. Wait till you see old Shy Beaver, though. He's some boy." Hal threw back his head and laughed.

The ranch house presently reached, they turned into a broad driveway. It led straight to the house, curved smoothly to the left and continued on to the red-roofed stables in the rear of the residence. Of Spanish architecture, the wide center doorway of the house opened into a patio. The long windows of the second story opened onto balconies, as did the win-

dows above the patio. These opened onto one balcony which extended around all four sides of the court. The door to the patio now swung gently open. A white-clad Chinaman greeted them with smiles and little bobbing bows.

"All right, Tah Fom!" greeted Hal cheerily. "This is my pal, Kent Sherwood, who didn't get smashed in the wreck. Kent, this is Tah Fom, the most valuable man on the ranch. Aren't you, Tah Fom?"

"Less, sir," Tah Fom agreed with a high gleeful little chuckle.

"Oh, Sinbad," Hal turned to the pony, "go on to the stable; good boy."

The pony obediently trotted off. Hal led the way into the cool, shadowy patio. Kent had hardly time for a hasty survey of it as he followed his chum through the court and on into the house to meet Mr. and Mrs. Brent.

Half an hour later, Hal left Kent in the large, airy bedroom which was to be his temporarily. He had met Hal's parents and found them quite to his liking. He thought he would like to pretend they were his own folks during his stay at Sweet Water Ranch. Kent was an orphan whose parents had died before he was old enough to remember much

about them. He had been brought up by his father's only sister.

"I'd better get busy or I won't be ready for dinner." Kent rose from the chair near the window into which he had dropped briefly. He lifted his suit-case, depositing it on the bed. He undid the straps mechanically, his thoughts far away.

"Great Jiminy Christmas!" Kent stared blankly at the now opened suit-case. What was the matter with it? Where were the two white silk shirts he had placed on top for ready use. Where were the other articles which had brimmed it?

The case he was staring into contained two soft white collars, three neckties, a pair of tan socks, a small, plain brush and comb and a familiar sheaf of magazines.

Kent flopped down on the bed with a kind of humorous groan. He had begun to see light.

"I know all about it now," he said aloud, and ruefully. "That queer fellow grabbed my suit-case by mistake and left me his. They looked about the same on the outside, but the inside—how different!"

With an impatient sweep of the arm he slammed the meagerly-filled case shut and

walked to the window, hands in his pockets, as he considered the situation.

"I'll have to borrow some of Hal's togs until my trunk comes or this chap sends me my case," he said again. "Hope he sends his address along with it. If he doesn't, how am I going to get his case to him? He knows *my* address is Sweet Water Ranch. Now we'll see what kind of stuff old mysterious mystery is made of. There's enough of value in my case to warrant his keeping it, if he's crooked. If he's straight he'll send the case here the minute he finds out his mistake—if he made a mistake. If he never sends it—well, he's not the kind of boy I think he is."

CHAPTER III

Getting Acquainted with Whirlwind

"HEY there, Whirlwind! Mind your step. Keep your teeth at home. I'm no apple for you to take a bite from. Go and bite Kent. Then he won't admire you so much. Be sure, *I* don't."

Hal Brent moved out of the thoroughbred's nipping reach. The two chums were in the great stone barn below the ranch house paying a morning call to Whirlwind, Mr. Brent's particular favorite.

A week had passed since Kent's arrival at Sweet Water Ranch. Even in that short space of time he had seen and absorbed much of interest. Best of all, Kent liked the horses. He spent as much time at the stable and corrals as he could within the bounds of courtesy to his chum. Anxious that Kent should speedily learn to ride, Hal was always willing to accompany him there.

"You're spoiling old Mr. Whirlwind, Kent," declared Hal. "Every time I come within a rod of him he thinks he ought to have an

apple. I'll hand no apples to a horse that tried to throw me over the moon."

"I want him to like me. He's used to me now. I'm going to ride him some day, see if I don't." Kent smiled as he made this assertion.

"You mean, I won't see you after you do," laughingly translated Hal. "All right. Go as far as you like. I went quite a way over his head. I didn't like it at all. You may feel differently about it."

"I'll probably go the same route once or twice," predicted Kent. "I'm satisfied with Blazer just now. He's a fine pony. But, some day, Whirlwind." Kent closed his jaws with a click which signified unalterable determination.

"I've a surprise for you this A. M.," Hal remarked as he watched Kent's steady but wary attempts to stroke Whirlwind's satiny black neck.

"What?" Kent turned quickly from the horse.

"Wait and see," teased Hal. "The surprise will come strolling along pretty soon. Here it comes now." Glancing out through the archway Hal had spied a tall, lithe figure approaching at anything but a stroll.

"Hooray! How are you, Mejicano?" Hal raced across the stable to meet the newcomer as he reached the door.

"Well, very well, *mi hermano* [my brother]. Lopez gave me your word. I leave the sheep with him to take the care."

The young Spaniard grasped the hand Hal had extended to him with a frank, engaging smile. In his black sombrero, white blouse, turned in at the throat, khaki trousers and high-laced boots, Kent mentally likened him to a character in a play.

"Tony, this is my chum, Kent Sherwood. Kent, this is Antonio Sebastian Valdez, Spanish grandee, etc. Shake hands and be glad you've met.

"I sent for you for two reasons," Hal continued. "I want you to take Whirlwind and ride him for Kent's benefit, Mejicano. Next, you've got to can the sheep and come with us. We're going on a trip to the mountains. The range over there that's run by the ghost of White Shadow's great-grandfather."

The Mexican's face underwent several quick changes as he listened to Hal. Mention of ghosts caused his white teeth to show themselves in an amused smile.

"It is for the Señor Brent to say if I may

leave the sheep, *mi hermano,*" he said dubiously.

"Oh, he's already said it. You are away behind the times, Tony."

"It may be so," Tony agreed with pretended seriousness, then laughed.

"We'd like to start by the last of next week, Tony," Hal said briskly. "We have a lot to do, though. Kent and I will have to go to Carson City to buy some of the stuff we'll need. I am going to ask George Davis to go along on the trip. We need him. Dad says he will get him a better job than the one at the station when he comes back. Four of us, a guide and maybe White Shadow if he happens along. No one has seen him for months. He may be trailing around in the very mountains we are aiming for."

"Not for long time have I seen White Shadow," Tony returned. "I have seen the Señor Craig but last week. Mariposa Ranch has the open doors again."

"You *don't say so?*" Hal performed a fantastic step or two on the stable floor to express his jubilation. "Well, *let me tell you now,* Mr. Craig goes with us, if he will. That will please Dad. He said when I talked first about our trip that he wished Mr. Craig were here." Hal

pressed the Mexican for more details regarding the return of Hartwell Craig, the Brents' nearest neighbor on the north.

The three young men presently left the stable and went into the largest of the corrals. Tony had promised to show Kent some fancy riding; also to bring out Whirlwind and put him through his paces. Silverheels, Blazer, Sinbad and half a dozen other ponies were already loose in the corral.

One by one the Mexican caught them, though they teasingly evaded him, and put them through one graceful maneuver after another. He rode them without saddle and wound up the performance by guiding Blazer and Silverheels by their manes and changing from the back of one to that of the other.

"If I could ride like that, I'd never go back east to college or home or anything else!" said Kent as Tony slipped lightly from Blazer's back and landed beside the two lads. "I'd just stay out West and ride."

"It is the life," explained Tony with no trace of vanity. "I have lived among horses. So it is I know how to ride. Now I will bring out that one, Whirlwind. I must go then, *mi hermano*, for Lopez must eat and he will go to his shack when I am returned to the sheep."

"Stand clear and give him room," warned Hal, as Tony disappeared into the barn. "Whirlwind comes out of that barn on his hind legs half the time. The other half he comes out on his forelegs with his hind feet gracefully waving in midair. Oh, I know that beast!"

Kent drew back to the corral fence, breathless with expectation.

Came a sharp clop-clop of hoofs and Tony appeared, leading the beautiful, high-bred horse Kent so greatly admired. He came willingly out of the stable. The minute he was out, however, he rose on his hind legs and thrashed about, ears pinned back. A sharp word of reproof in Spanish from the Mexican and he came to the ground in docile fashion.

"What made you saddle him, Tony?" Hal inquired, looking slightly disappointed. "I wanted Kent to see you ride him bareback."

"There was a reason, Señor Hal. I shall soon tell you of it. See he is *bueno* [good] now. No tempers, no ears flat to the head. He has the four legs to walk on instead of the two."

Tony vaulted to the saddle and rode the thoroughbred around and around the corral. Never for an instant did Kent take his eyes from horse or rider.

After a little Tony dismounted close to where Hal and Kent were perched on the top rail of the corral fence.

"Now *you* will ride him, Señor Kent," he invited. "He is quite gentle to-day. You are strong in the arms. You can hold him. If he throws you, it will not make you to die. I have seen many men thrown from the horse, but never one killed."

"*I—ride Whirlwind?*" Kent's tones rose in surprise. "I wish I dared."

"For goodness' sake, Mejicano, leave me my pal," objected Hal half seriously. "You know what this gentle little animal did to me."

"It is the time now," persisted Antonio. "Señor Kent thinks he must wait for the long practice of riding. No; he has not to break this horse. That he could not do for, oh, long time. He must learn as the cowboy learn. This—" The Mexican shrugged his shoulders. "It is not so hard."

"I'll take your word for it. I'm going to try it." A bright color burned in Kent's cheeks. His blue eyes were ablaze with the desire for achievement.

Dropping from the fence he approached Whirlwind, his whole mind bent to the task in hand. Coal black, with a long, graceful

body and lithe, powerful legs, Whirlwind boasted Arabian blood. His full mane and tail were soft and fine and his skin bore the high gloss of breed as well as care.

"Be not afraid to bother him," advised Tony. "Who is he but the horse? Yet he knows if you are of too much respect for him. Now mount, *amigo* [friend]."

His heart beating hard, Kent made a valiant effort to follow Tony's shrewd advice. A breathless instant and he was in the saddle.

Kent had resolved to adopt Tony's methods, so far as he could. Whirlwind, however, did not intend to recognize his right to ride him. Back went his ears and around the corral he raced. Kent kept a desperate hold on the rein as he endeavored to stay on Whirlwind's back. The horse, now angry at the imposition, changed his tactics. He rose on his hind legs, determined to throw Kent from his back. Kent hung grimly on. Failing, Whirlwind charged on the corral fence. There was a crash of splintering rails as he kicked down a section of the fence, then over the remains he went, Kent still on his indignant back.

Down the driveway and out through the gateway, which luckily chanced to be open, he raced in a fury. Kent knew that to relax

his hold for a second meant the dreaded spill. Whirlwind had taken to the north and was pounding up the rough road, his hoofs ringing against the hard ground.

On he tore and still on. Kent had no idea of where he was or of the direction in which he was being carried. Gradually he began to realize that he could not hang on much longer. Whirlwind had not abated his mad flight. Every now and then he made a fresh attempt to oust Kent from his back.

Coming toward him, far up the road, two horsemen appeared over the brow of a little incline. Kent did not see them, but they saw him and drew off to one side to give him room. Then the end came. With a loud disdainful snort, Whirlwind gathered himself for a supreme effort. Over his head went his stubborn rider, to strike heavily at the left of the road.

Kent landed on the ground with a dazed impression that every bone in his body had been broken. Then he drifted off into the unknown. When he opened his eyes he saw two persons seated on the ground beside him. One was a man of perhaps forty-five with a keen, pleasant face. The other was his mysterious companion of the Pullman car.

CHAPTER IV

Interviewing Shy Beaver

"WHAT—where did *you* come from?" were Kent's first words. "I thought—" a black mist again swam before his eyes.

"Keep quiet for a little," said the older man. "You had better lie still. I have just been over you for broken bones. Don't find any, thank fortune."

"Oh, I'm all right now," Kent insisted, coming back to the situation. "I was only faint for a minute or so. Whirlwind gave me an awful shaking up. I'll ride him yet. It's just as Tony says. It hardly ever kills a fellow to get a throw-down like this."

The older man smiled. "Quite like Tony," he commented. "I prefer a horse I can trust. But I don't belong to the harum-scarum younger generation—now." He added the "now" with humorous stress.

The merest suspicion of a smile touched the brown-eyed boy's mouth. He was looking down at Kent, his expression half pleased,

half sheepish. He opened his lips as though to speak, changed his mind and remained silent.

An energetic hallooing from the south broke upon the trio. Kent sat up at the sound. Hal and Antonio were coming up, horseback, shouting as they came. Hal was riding Silverheels. Tony, the undaunted, bestrode Whirlwind.

"Rascal!" exclaimed the Mexican. He left Whirlwind's back with a flying leap. "I thought—"

"Have some sympathy for a fellow when he's down," pleaded Kent, in an injured tone. He was well aware Tony had not meant him.

"Yes, I should say so," seconded Hal, as he dropped lightly from the saddle.

"Well you know, Señor Kent, I don't mean you," said Tony. "*That* one is the rascal." He nodded toward Whirlwind. "He throws you very hard? I hope not. He comes home to the drive. There he stops to chew the grass of the lawn. We know something happens. I say, 'Now you Whirlwind, you go back with me. I tell you something.' We know you, Señor Kent, are on this road somewhere."

Hal, in the meantime, had hurried forward to shake hands with his friend, Mr. Craig.

"Hadn't the least idea you were home!" he cried delightedly. "Last I heard of you, Dad wrote me you had gone on a cruise down the Mediterranean. You're home just in time to join a trip I'm planning."

"We'll see about that," returned the older man. "Hal, this is my young friend, David Whitney. He has come to make me a long visit. David, this is Harold Brent, my neighbor."

Hal hastened to introduce Kent, whom Tony had helped to his feet, to the ranchman and his guest. Tony was then introduced to David Whitney.

"I—you must think me a fine sort of person," blurted out David as he shook Kent's hand. "I didn't know I had your suit-case until afterward. I was going to send it to you, but Mr. Craig said we were coming over to Sweet Water Ranch soon and I could bring it to you then. Your case is just as you left it."

"Oh, I know that," Kent assured. "What I'd like to know is where you went to. You must have skipped out of that car like a streak of lightning."

"I did. I wasn't hurt; only shaken up a bit. I should have waited to see if you were

all right, but I—" David paused as if hardly knowing how to go on. He stood eyeing Kent, looking embarrassed.

"That was all right. You weren't tied to me, you know." Kent knew that in the same circumstances he would not have left David until assured of his safety. Still, he generously overlooked the apparent indifference of his erstwhile companion. Without thinking he added: "Your suit-case is just as you left it, too."

He regretted the statement immediately. A quick, shamed tide of red flooded the other boy's cheeks. Kent hastened to change the subject by saying lightly: "A fine bronco-buster I'd make, wouldn't I?"

"How do you feel now?" David ignored Kent's light question. He was still ill at ease.

"I feel as though I'd had my bones thoroughly rattled and flung down in a heap." Kent energetically rubbed first his legs then his arms. "You Tartar!" He shook his fist at Whirlwind. The culprit had taken an obedient stand at one side of the road in response to a sharp command from Tony in Spanish. He quivered with impatience, clattering his hoofs in an agony of desire to be off again.

"I am to teach this one his business. Well he knows his crime." Tony walked sternly up to Whirlwind and placed a firm brown hand on each side of the black satiny face. Imperatively he addressed the animal in Spanish, not for an instant relaxing his grip. As he talked he grew more emphatic, though he did not raise his voice. The quartette listened to the harangue with varying expressions of amusement, mingled with respect. At the last Tony pronounced several Spanish words very slowly, but with more emphasis than he had yet used. Like lightning his hands left the horse's face. He turned his back squarely upon the rebuked thoroughbred.

"Now he knows; for the while, anyhow." Tony joined the watching group.

"You certainly understand horses," broke in almost unwilling tones of admiration from David Whitney.

"I'd give the world if I could make that kind of magic," Kent said.

"Don't praise him too much," admonished Hal. "He may get a crush on himself. You're pretty fair as a horse trainer, Tony, but don't take yourself too seriously. Remember, Kent and I have both been fired off old Whirlie's exclusive back. You can't boast of that thrilling adventure."

"I must be careful not think too much of myself. *Si, mi hermano.*" The Mexican boy grinned derisively. "Very good words. I will tell them to Whirlwind. He also has what you call the crush on himself."

This raised a laugh at Hal's expense. For a few minutes the party stood beside their horses while Hal talked eagerly of the glories of the trip he had planned, Kent and Tony putting in a sentence now and then. David was the only silent member of the group.

"How would you like to go out on the trip, David?" Mr. Craig finally asked him. "I believe it would be a very good thing for us to do."

"How long would we be away?" asked David without enthusiasm.

"Through July and August." It was Hal who answered. "I promised Dad and Mother we'd be back by the first of September. That'll give me a little time with them before college opens."

Idly watching David's face, Kent saw a swift flash of gratification pass over it. He glanced quickly at Mr. Craig. Kent was sure the latter answered the glance with one of equal significance, veiled though it was.

"I'll go if you say so, Mr. Hartwell." With

this brief reply David again relapsed into moody silence.

"You'd better come over to Sweet Water and have a talk with us about the trip, Mr. Craig," invited Hal. "Come to dinner Friday evening, you and Mr. Whitney. Ahem!" He rolled his eyes comically at David. "You won't catch me Mister-ing you, once we've started on our trip. Dave, Whit, Whitney, and, on rare and state occasions, David, will be what you'll get."

"Call me what you please."

The indifference of the reply brought a slight pucker to Hal's forehead. It disappeared instantly. Hal charitably decided that Mr. Craig's guest "hadn't really got used to our gang yet."

"We'll accept your invitation, Hal. You may expect us on Friday afternoon at about five. Thank you. Now we must be moving. We are going on to the southern boundaries of Sweet Water. It is a pleasant ride. I'd ask you to join us, but it's a case of only two horses to three riders."

"Much obliged, but we couldn't go if we had another pony. Tony is due on the range. Kent and I are keeping a lookout for Shy Beaver. We'd like to take White Shadow

with us on our trip. Shy Beaver will probably trail along, anyhow. You know how he is. He'll start out all by himself. First thing we know we'll be stumbling over the old fellow."

"Yes, I know old Shy Beaver." Mr. Craig smiled as he vaulted to the saddle.

His companion followed his example. Mounted again, he turned his head to speak to Kent, who stood a pace or two behind him.

"I'll not forget your suit-case," he briefly assured. "Glad to have seen you again, and—" with embarrassed effort he said, "your friends."

"I guess Shy Beaver isn't the only shy guy around here," was Hal's opinion as the two horsemen cantered off. "That fellow is either bashful or grouchy. We'll hand him the benefit of the doubt and say he's shy. It gave me a surprise to hear that he was the chap you met on the Pullman."

"It was queer," agreed Kent. "After Whirlwind handed me that jolt it gave me another to open my eyes and see this fellow, Whitney, sitting beside me."

"Gee whiz, but Whirlwind's a terror! He certainly has that firing act down fine! He's positively wicked, that nag! Honestly, Kent,

are you O.K. again?" Hall regarded his chum anxiously. "You ride Silverheels back and let me walk. It isn't far."

"I'm not made of glass. I can stand a few shocks," Kent said sturdily. His blue eyes roved longingly toward Whirlwind. He was undaunted. He would have liked to ride the thoroughbred back to the stable, despite the hazard of such an undertaking.

"I am the one to walk," announced Tony. "Keep you to Silverheels, Señor Hal. I shall walk beside Whirlwind and Señor Kent can ride him."

Hal uttered a derisive yell at this programme. "He'll run away with both of you. See if he doesn't."

"He will not run away. He must do as I tell him." Tony led the horse over to Kent and motioned the latter to mount.

Kent obeyed with alacrity. He had perfect faith in Tony's management.

Not at all pleased, Whirlwind made no effort to bolt, though he tossed his head frequently and pinned back his ears.

Arrived at the gateway of the home ranch, Hal suddenly left Silverheels' back with a ringing whoop. From beside the gate a figure rose and stood solemnly erect. Kent gave

one look and strangled a laugh with difficulty. He had been prepared to see Shy Beaver wrapped in the folds of a bright colored Navajo blanket. What he had not expected to see was a battered brown derby hat, perched coyly on Shy Beaver's coarse, flowing black hair. The hat was a size too small for a perfect fit. The combination of hat and blanket were almost too much for Kent's risibles. Under the blanket he caught a glimpse of deerskin leggins. The Indian also wore a pair of heavily-beaded moccasins.

"How, *how*, HOW!" Hal was shouting as he shook Shy Beaver by both hands. "Notice the hat! My, what a sport!"

"Hat good. Ugh?" grunted the Indian, the barest shadow of a smile flickering across his immobile features.

"Good? I'll say it is. It's *great.* Never would have known you in a crowd, dear college chum." Hal emphasized his remarks by a playful slap on the Indian's shoulder.

The nearer approach to a grin now showed itself on Shy Beaver's face. Of all the persons he had known in his nomad travels over the state of Nevada, Hal was his favorite.

"How long?" Tony now questioned, grasping the Indian's hand.

"One moon; mebbe half. Stay wigwam; rest. Walk long. Sit while."

"Sit awhile, nothing," briskly cut in Hal. "We're going to the mountains to get a line on that wonderful spirit of White Shadow's great-grandfather. You've got to come along and introduce us to your ghostly relatives."

"Me don't," Shy Beaver returned with stolid firmness. "You go. Me stay. Talk your father. Eat long. Sleep. Smoke much. Ugh."

"Have it your own way," conceded Hal. "You'll miss the time of your gay young life, Shy Beaver, if you stay behind."

"Mebbe. White Shadow no there." The Indian pointed toward the purple-peaked mountain range to the east of them. "Hunt long. Go Canada, mebbe."

"That's too bad," Hal cried out disappointedly. "He's the best guide we could possibly have. We need one, you know. Mr. Craig will go with us, but he thinks we must have a guide, too. He doesn't know those mountains very well. You've been quite a way over that range, S. B. Why won't you go?"

"Naw. No go." Shy Beaver was not to be coaxed. "Know only little trail. Much hard. White Shadow no want."

"Ah-h!" ejaculated Antonio. "That's what bothers him." He addressed a question to the Indian in the language of the Navajos.

Shy Beaver replied to it at some length for him. Kent and Hal watched interestedly the faces of the two speakers.

"He says," Tony presently translated, "the mountains have many bad spirits in them. Some are Indians. White Shadow will fight them alone. Then they are no more. It is better to keep away from the mountains until all these are gone."

"Oh, bosh!" Hal hooted derisively. "What's the matter with White Shadow? He promised Dad and me once, long ago, that he'd take us through those very mountains. I'd like to talk with that Indian gentleman for about half an hour. He'd come across, all right."

"No come here more this year," was Shy Beaver's dampening information.

"He can stay away then," retorted Hal good-humoredly. "We can rake up a guide between here and Carson City. Come on up to the house, S. B. Whirlwind is getting fussy. Let's move on. Oh, gracious! I forgot to introduce you to my eastern chum."

Kent reached down from Whirlwind's back

to shake hands with Shy Beaver. He was now growing used to the latter's headgear and bade fair not to disgrace himself. The procession started up the drive with Hal ahead, leading Silverheels. The Indian stalked at his side. Antonio and Kent fell in behind with Whirlwind. Thus they caught the full effect of the brown derby from a back view.

"I'm used to him now," muttered Kent, "but at first—oh, my!"

"I know. Sometimes I laugh, but not before his face. That he hates. Now it is strange about White Shadow. He is the great fox. He wishes to keep the white men away from those mountains." Tony spoke musingly.

"Does White Shadow resemble Shy Beaver?" asked Kent. "If so, describe his costume so I won't be unprepared for him if ever we run across him."

"No; White Shadow is of beauty for an Indian. He has the dignity always. He is not the Navajo. He is the Yaqui. The Yaquis are of the old Mexico and there are few left."

Tony's explanation ended at this point. The cavalcade had reached the entrance to the patio. Shy Beaver halted abruptly.

"Me here." He jerked his oddly-topped head toward the patio. "No go stable. You go."

"All right, S. B. Go on in and make yourself at home," was Hal's good-humored return. "You'll see us later. Ring for Tah Fom. He'll see you have eats. Strawberry shortcake to-day with whipped cream. Think of *that*, old man!"

A real smile broke out all over the Indian's hard brown countenance. Like the proverbial bear, Shy Beaver was partial to sweets. About to open the door of the patio, he turned and called earnestly to Hal. The latter was just starting off with Silverheels.

"You go north. Plenty mountains." His tone was almost pleading.

"Nope." Hal vigorously shook his head, quiet obstinacy in his tone. "No northern trips for us, S. B. We're going to stick to our first plan."

"Ugh! Mebbe you be sorry," said Shy Beaver, and disappeared into the patio.

CHAPTER V

The Talisman

"WELL, what's the latest dope on the guide problem?" asked Hal Brent several mornings later as Tah Fom ushered Hartwell Craig into the patio. "I know you've news or you wouldn't be here."

"Right you are, my boy. I've heard good news since David and I took dinner with you on Friday night. Norton, the Nevada hermit, has returned to his shack in the foothills. It's a long time since he has been seen in this part of the state. One of my overseers saw him only yesterday. If we can secure his services we shall have a guide who is a guide, and no mistake. Now my idea is this, Hal," continued Mr. Craig. "The sooner we start the—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Craig," hastily interposed Hal, "but would you mind waiting until I go for Kent and Tony? They are down at the corrals. George Davis will be here to-morrow."

"Get the boys here, by all means," agreed

the rancher. "Is old Shy Beaver with them? I'd like to ask him a few questions."

"Nothing doing," was the prompt reply. "The S. B. Information Bureau is closed. Can't get a word from him about the mountains. Besides, he's over at the Four Points Ranch to-day. He piked out before daylight to spend the day with Cummings, the overseer. He likes Cummings almost as well as he likes me. He's keeping out of my way, the sly old gazabo."

With this Hal set off for the stables to round up Tony and Kent. He found them exercising Whirlwind. Kent was riding him around the largest corral under Tony's watchful eye.

"Hooray!" saluted Hal. "Put that timid, retiring little pet back in his stall and come on up to the house. Mr. Craig is there and wants to see you. He has a line on a guide—a crackerjack. If he can hire this fellow we'll be some little hiking organization."

Kent obediently slipped from the saddle at Hal's opening speech. "Let me lead him into the stable, Tony," he begged. "I am curious to see how he'll behave."

Tony made a gesture of assent as Kent grasped the rein. Kent proceeded to the stable, very proud of his achievement. Each

day he was making a little progress toward gaining Whirlwind's difficult favor.

"Just as old Whirlwind has begun to treat me decently I have to go away and leave him," he said regretfully as he joined his friends. "By the time we come back he will have forgotten me."

"No." Tony shook his head. "Never that horse forgets. He has come to like you a little, Señor Kent. He will be the lonesome one while we are gone. There will be no one to admire him and make him the pet. This he likes. Señor Brent rides him but seldom."

"I'd love to take him with us," Kent declared. "Oh, I know it's out of the question," he continued hastily as Hal raised a protesting hand.

"Believe me, it is," Hal agreed. "Do you want to see the whole outfit kicked into a deep canyon some fine day by that frolicsome beast?"

"Hardly." Kent chuckled a little at the question. "Going to take Silverheels?" he asked.

"Yep. Silverheels, Blazer—which of the others, Tony?" Hal turned to Tony. "Sinbad is too fat, isn't he?"

"*Un pocito* [a little]. Marvel and Caro,

perhaps," suggested Tony. "All are tough and good climbers."

"Will you ride Silverheels, Kent?" Hal generously offered.

"No, indeed." Kent knew his chum's fondness for the dappled gray, white-footed pony. "I wouldn't think of taking him from you. Any of the other three will suit me."

The trio were now well on the way to the ranch house. Arrived there, Kent and Tony greeted Mr. Craig with boyish enthusiasm. They found him disposing appreciatively of a large cinnamon bun and a cup of coffee which Mrs. Brent had insisted he should have.

"Now that the boys are here I will leave you to yourselves," she declared. "All I stipulate, Mr. Craig, is that you return to Sweet Water by the first of September. I'm fond of my boy's companionship, too."

"Don't you worry, Mother, I'll be right back here by that time. I promise you," Hal made confident assurance.

"Mother's a brick about this trip," Hal said when, after a brief exchange of pleasantries with Mr. Craig, Mrs. Brent left them. "She's a little worried for fear something bad may happen to us in the mountains. But she doesn't *say* so. She wouldn't spoil our pleas-

ure for the world by letting us think she was the least bit upset over it."

"Your mother is the finest woman I know, Hal, and let me deliver a lecture to you *right now.* While we are on this trip curb that reckless habit of yours of rushing headlong into things." Mr. Craig spoke with kindly earnestness. "An ounce of caution won't come amiss. While I do not look for any startling adventures, I want no mishaps which can be avoided by using a little caution."

"Everything once, you know," laughed Hal, not at all abashed by the warning. "I'll try not to do anything specially reckless—more than once."

"That's about as near an approach to a promise as I expected you would make," smiled the older man. "Now to get down to business. We must make up our budget this morning. We must pack as light an outfit as possible. We shall be obliged to carry enough food supplies to last us throughout the trip. Once we reach the foothills there will be no place where we can later secure them. We can count on some game, and that is about all."

"We'll mostly live on bacon and biscuits and canned stuff," asserted Hal. "We need

a lot of flour and some cornmeal, too. It'll keep in that cool climate. Old Tony can make tortillas and he's a great cook, too. I nominate you to do the cooking, Mejicano."

"*Si*, and what then will you be doing all the time?" mildly inquired the newly-nominated cook.

"Just hanging around ready to eat what you stodge up," retorted Hal easily.

"*Quizas* [perhaps]." Tony raised his dark brows. "It is you who must learn to cook and take your turn."

"All right. We'll settle that point when we get to it. What else are we going to tote besides bacon and flour and canned goods?"

"A whole lot more," decisively informed the rancher. "We'll presently make a list of the food supplies. What about a tent? Shall we bother with it or take our chances in the open? The mountains are sure to have plenty of caves and natural shelters. Besides, we can always put up a lean-to when we need one. Nothing is finer than a bough bed in the open with blankets spread over it."

"No tent for mine," chose Kent. "I've read a lot about bough beds and sleeping in the open, now I am crazy to try it out."

Neither Tony nor Hal were in favor of

burdening the outfit with a tent. As for the two absent members of the expedition, David and George, Hal vouched for George's approval of their decision. Mr. Craig remarked that David Whitney would be satisfied with whatever he planned.

When at last the long list was finished, the rancher studied it rather doubtfully.

"It seems like a good deal of stuff to carry along, but I can't cut it down much. I thought two burros would be able to take it. I find we shall need four. That means a man to look after the beasts and one more person to feed."

"The burros will need little care, Señor Craig," was Tony's opinion. "I will look after them. Once in a while the others may take the turn to mind them. I could find the small Mexican boy to mind them, but it is as you say, one more to feed. One of us will ride behind them to see that they do not stray."

"That settles one difficulty." Mr. Craig gave a relieved sigh. "As for clothes—hunting suits of corduroy will be best. Each man to carry his own rifle and shells and water bottle. A good sized knapsack apiece will be strictly needed. In these we can put a

change of underwear, socks, two or three days' supplies and whatever small articles we may need."

For some little time the quartette busied themselves with the planning of their outfit, rejecting from or adding to the list until it suited them in every particular. Finally it was arranged to their mutual satisfaction.

"I had intended speaking of our start first," remarked Mr. Craig. "It is as well, however, to have the outfitting problem disposed of. This is Saturday. We should start not later than next Thursday morning at sunrise. That means quick work to get the supplies together. I have already told Hal that I hope to secure the services of Gilbert Norton, the Nevada hermit. If we start on Thursday morning we shall reach his shack in the foothills about Friday afternoon. I hope he will be there and that I can persuade him to go with us. If not, then we will press on by ourselves. If White Shadow and Shy Beaver and a host of other Indians are at home in those mountains, why not we?"

"Shy Beaver says he has only been a little way up those mountains," laughed Hal. "He's forgotten how far, I guess." Hal recounted his conversation with the wily old Indian.

"Hm!" The rancher frowned slightly. "It can't be that some of the Navvys have broken loose from the reservation. That might account for his warning. Sorry I haven't been able to sidetrack Shy Beaver. I must try to catch him before we go."

"I think it is White Shadow's fault," rejoined Hal. "He's a most unsociable beggar, you know. Very likely he doesn't want any one stamping around his hunting ground. Shy Beaver is probably pretty superstitious. Besides, he's had his orders from White Shadow. I know White Shadow. Tony knows him better than I. If we should run across him we can manage him even if he gets up on a high horse."

"I'll leave that part of our trip to you then," smiled the rancher. "My acquaintance with White Shadow is very limited. I've never seen him but twice."

It was nearly noon when Mr. Craig left them after refusing an invitation to stay to luncheon. He excused himself on the ground that Whitney, his young guest, would be waiting for his return.

For a man so open in most respects he had exhibited a trace of reserve both in speaking of David Whitney and whenever the latter's

name was mentioned. Kent noticed this and could only wonder if Tony and Hal had. He had met David for the third time on the night he had dined at Sweet Water Ranch. He could not say that he felt any better acquainted with him than at their first meeting on the train. The strange lad had an aggravating habit of suddenly retiring into his shell. He would appear to be interested in something that was being said, then he would "fold up like a clam," according to Hal. If pressed for an opinion he returned a short, gruff answer, lapsing immediately afterward into morose silence.

"I hope Whitney isn't going to be a wet blanket on this trip," Hal said abruptly, after Mr. Craig had taken his leave.

"Queer, but I was thinking the same thing," confessed Kent. "I can't make that fellow out. Mr. Craig seems to think a good deal of him. I guess he has enough good points, only we haven't found 'em out yet."

"'Mebbe'," quoted Hal, imitating Shy Beaver's guttural tone. "Craig has never said a word about where Whitney came from or how long he has known him."

"Señor Craig does not wish to say much of this David," quietly interposed Antonio.

"He has the reasons of his own for this. I have watched him and he is this one's good friend. Perhaps this David has had the trouble somewhere and comes to Señor Craig for help. You know, Señor Hal—"

"I know one thing," interrupted Hal, "that is, no more señoring me, Tony. You can hang a respectful handle on Craig's name but not mine. I'm just Hal to you after this, Tonums. You needn't mind handing that señor to Kent, either. He's of no more account than I. From now on it's to be Hal and Kent and Tony. Don't be respectful to George. He won't know how to act. I'm going to call this new fellow, Whitney. If ever he unbends, I may call him Dave. Perhaps it's as you surmised, Tony. He may have had troubles of his own and come to Mr. Craig for help. Craig may be his only friend, for all we know. Well, he'll have to change a lot before ever he is a friend of mine. I think he's a grouch. He doesn't like me, either."

Hal blurted out this last rather resentfully. He had been a trifle peeved on the evening Hartwell Craig and David had been entertained at the ranch house by the latter's brusque manner.

"I think he's not used to other fellows," hazarded Kent. "From the little he said of himself on the train, I believe he's had to work hard and hasn't had many good times. That may have soured him on everybody."

"He'd better take a brace and go in for a good time, now that it's coming his way," was Hal's dry opinion. "We've some tall hustling ahead of us to get our part of the outfit ready by Thursday. Good thing we went to Carson City last week and loaded up with a lot of the stuff we need. Tell you what, Tony, Kent and I will rig up the clothes and supplies part of the expedition. You tend to the ponies and burros. George had better take Caro, I guess. He is the gentlest of the four ponies. Kent can manage Blazer, since he's determined I shall have Silverheels. That leaves Marvel for you. He's a favorite of yours, anyway, so it looks as though everybody was bound to be suited."

The arrival of George Davis the following morning completed the quartette from Sweet Water Ranch. With Hartwell Craig, David Whitney and the guide the expedition would be seven strong. It being Sunday, the four boys spent the day quietly at the ranch house with the Brents. Monday's sunrise saw them up and busy.

Hal claimed the expedition as his "party," and insisted that he should provide the supplies. Mr. Craig reluctantly gave in to the lad in this, but furnished his own horse and David's. He also made up a combination utility and medicine kit and added a number of items to his personal outfit which he thought would be of convenience to all.

Impatient to start for the mountains, the three days which lay between them and the eagerly anticipated Thursday morning passed slowly to the young trail makers. This despite the fact that they had work enough on hand to keep them fully occupied.

Long before daylight on Thursday morning the quartette were up and loading the burros by electric light at the rear entrance to the ranch house. Just as the day was breaking faintly pink in the eastern sky, Hartwell Craig rode up the driveway with David. Drawn out of his usual sullen manner by the novelty of the expedition, David's somber features had lightened into a look nearly approaching boyish happiness. He had quite forgotten himself and was dwelling only on the excitement of the trip.

The last burro loaded to Antonio's critical satisfaction, nothing more remained to be

done save to mount the ponies and be off on the great adventure. With loud whoops of pure joy the quartette of young men presently raced stableward.

They formed an enlivening picture of sturdy young manhood, as, mounted on their ponies, they made a last halt behind the ranch house for a line-up.

"Some little procession," boasted Hal, proudly. "Too bad there isn't a motion picture camera on the job. We could certainly hand it to a movie gang of Westerners. We're the real thing."

"They'd have nothing on us," agreed George Davis with satisfaction. George was roosting on the peaks of delight. No such adventure had ever before dawned upon his meager, work-filled life. He could hardly believe that he was not dreaming.

"Oh, folks, how do you like our speed?" called out Hal to his father and mother who had just appeared on the scene. From the doorway behind them Tah Fom's genial yellow face peered forth, one vast smile. Two of the maids beamed on the party from the kitchen window. Several of the stablemen had also come up from the stables to witness the start.

"All very well at the beginning. See that you come back in as good order," was Mr. Brent's succinct advice. He smiled indulgently, however, his keen blue eyes resting fondly on his stalwart son. "Remember what you promised your mother, Hal. That covers everything, I guess."

"I'll not forget. Honestly, Dad and Mother, I'll can all reckless rushing acts. I'll be as calm and collected as old S. B.," promised Hal. "Wonder where the old tortoise is? He wouldn't come around to see us off, because he doesn't approve of us."

The business of saying farewell was brief, but full of affectionate friendliness on the part of the Brents toward the trail makers. Hal's frankly loving good-bye to his mother was typical of his warm, generous nature.

"Be good boys and let Mr. Craig decide what's best for you," the little woman admonished the lads with a motherly fondness which made each one of them feel that he had a claim upon her affection. Even David's dark features softened visibly.

With morning now high and bright in the eastern heavens the pony riders finally got under way. Mr. Craig, Hal, George and David rode ahead of the burros. Kent, who

had elected to assist Tony in minding the beasts of burden for the first day, rode behind the pack train. Around the ranch house and down the broad driveway they went, a gallant little expedition.

At the gates the procession halted, the lads waving their hats and shouting last farewells to the Brents, who had now taken up their station outside the patio door.

As the riders swung onto the road they spied a familiar figure coming toward them at a trot. It was Shy Beaver and he was approaching at a pace usually foreign to him.

"How!" he saluted as Hal and George drew up almost under his nose.

"How, nothing. I've no time for you, S. B. You deserted us. Changed your mind at the last minute, mebbe?" Hal queried with pretended severity. "You will have to go back and coax Brewster, the stable boss, to let you have a pony. You'd better tell him I sent—"

"N-a-w!" Shy Beaver's tones vibrated with disgust. "Me *no go*. N-a-w! Come only say bye. Me—"

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, bye-bye!" Hal flapped his hand loosely from his wrist in a teasingly infantile manner. He was not

pleased with the Indian and took that particular method of showing it.

"You wait." The Indian's stolid countenance gave no sign of having recognized Hal's pleasant irony. "You *know*, me no go. Us frien's same. You mad me. No care. You no mad soon. Me give this. You wear. No bad spirit come near."

He held up to Hal a small object at which the latter stared uncomprehendingly. It looked like a small, elaborately-chased silver scroll into which three feathers had been cunningly fitted. They were not more than five inches in length; one white, one green and one red. The white feather stood in the middle. The back of the scroll opened. The two serrated edges could be sprung to clamp onto a fold of cloth. It was evidently very ancient; a relic of Mexico in the time of the Aztecs, perhaps. Where Shy Beaver had obtained it was a mystery. Nevertheless he now stood proffering it to Hal.

"Now what's it all about?" Hal had taken the talisman in his hand and was examining it curiously. "Much obliged, old man. But why give this to your humble servant? Why not keep it yourself for luck?"

"Naw!" This time the monosyllable was

earnest. "Very old. Very good. You wear." He pointed to the lapel of Hal's corduroy coat. "All time show. You get no harm."

"All right-o!" Not a little touched, Hal proceeded to clamp the quaint token to the lapel. It sprang hard and fastened with a tenacity that meant it would remain there unless removed by hand. "Sure you don't want to go along, S. B.? It's now or never."

"Me no go. Bye." Shy Beaver made a surprisingly quick turn and slipped away before Hal had an opportunity to say another word.

"What do you think of that?" Mr. Craig spoke with patent vexation. He had waited for the Indian to finish addressing Hal before having any talk with him. "*Sly* Beaver would suit him better, I think, for a name. He knew I would question him and he didn't intend to be quizzed. Let me see that talisman, Hal, will you?"

The party stopped briefly while the odd token was passed about among them for inspection. Tony examined it longest of all.

"I have seen one like this in the Museum at Mexico City. Once while my father lived he took me there. It is, as Shy Beaver has said, very old. Perhaps older than the Yaquis. Shy Beaver is afraid we will meet with danger."

CHAPTER VI

The Beginning of Adventure

FOR the first few miles the route of the riders lay directly south over a fairly good road. This was prosaic traveling, indeed, particularly to Kent. He yearned for a sight of the foothills which would mean the real beginning of their mountain adventure. Long before noon they had swerved from south to east and were making good progress over a wide trail, well defined by the passing of many riders.

Without the burros the party could have advanced much faster. These useful but arbitrary animals had to be considered. At eleven o'clock precisely one of them balked. It took the united efforts of Kent and Tony for the better part of an hour to show the balking burro his duty and get him on the move again. The others rode ahead but halted farther along the trail to wait for the laggers.

"A fine way to begin our trip!" scolded Hal, just before Kent and Tony caught up

with the outfit, driving the delinquent. "Believe me, we won't drag those lemons around with us when we get into the mountains. We'll picket 'em somewhere and make independent trips without their precious company. We can find a good spot for a headquarters and radiate from it. When we get sick of that we can travel on up and establish ourselves somewhere else."

"That is a good enough plan if it suits Norton," said Hartwell Craig, "provided we can secure him. I understand he is quite determined to have his own way when he takes out an expedition. Bear that in mind, boys, and defer to him accordingly; within reason, of course. He knows every inch of this country; remember that."

"I met him once. He came down to the station for a party of men he was going to take out," observed George. "He stood leaning against my truck waiting for the train to come in. He talked to me a little. I thought him fine. He looked a good deal more like the real West than anyone else I ever saw."

"Three or four times I have seen him, but never have I spoken with him. The sheep men say there is none like him on the trail," remarked Antonio.

"Dad said he hoped we got him," declared Hal. "Norton took him out on a hunting trip long ago. He's a dandy guide. Dad said he was good company, too. Maybe he'll be more or less stiff, though, with a gang of youngsters like us. It would be just our luck to miss him or else have him say he can't see trailing along with this aggregation."

Due to the balking burro the party lunched late. It was almost two o'clock when a halt was made beside a small clear pool of water which was formed by a tiny waterfall descending from a rocky formation of some height. Around the pool the grass grew lush and green. The travelers were glad to dismount at this pleasant spot and gather about the hamper which Tah Fom had packed for them.

"There's enough of civilized eats here for supper. After that we do our own cooking," Hal announced to the group of wayfarers as they lay stretched in characteristic attitudes about the little pool. The meal finished, all were enjoying the luxury of a brief rest.

"You mean you will do it for us," corrected Kent lazily.

"Did you hear me make any such rash promises?" Hal flung back. "You did not. I'll take my turn at it, and so will the rest of you."

"I hope you'll let me wear that talisman of yours on the days when you cook," said George Davis solemnly. "It's a preventive against harm, isn't it?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll prevent you from eating anything I cook, if I have to stand over you with my rifle," retorted Hal.

"Saved!" George dodged a playful sweep of Hal's arm. His sudden movement all but pitched him into the pool, greatly to Hal's loudly-expressed joy.

An hour's rest and they were on their way again. The balance of the afternoon they pushed steadily on, halting well before dark near the edge of a shallow ravine, thick with spruce and balsam trees. With a trickling thread of a stream close at hand and plenty of material for bough beds, it was an ideal spot for the camp.

"I should say we didn't need a guide with you along," Kent bluntly told Hartwell Craig that evening as the party sat around their own campfire. "You certainly know as much of woodcraft as a professional guide. That's the way it seems to me, anyhow."

"Oh, I am all right for this little stretch of country, but I had rather not tackle the mountains. They are a hard proposition,

Kent. They are full of queer crooks and turns. Caves, entrances formed by canyons that one may wander into and spend days before finding one's way out. Steep, rough trails to which even a trained pony doesn't want to stick. There's always the possibility of traveling in a circle and coming back to one's starting point when one is anxious to press on upward. All these annoyances are nil when one has a good guide. We're anxious to get over as much ground as we can during the trip.

"Of course," the ranchman continued, "if we can't have Norton, I'll do the best I can for the expedition, but it won't be a great deal. We'll have to stick to the lower reaches of the mountains and go slowly and carefully. Let me caution all of you, don't go straying off by yourselves. In union there is strength. Keep together on all occasions."

Long after his companions were asleep that night, Kent lay wide-eyed and excited on his fragrant bough bed. It was all so wonderful he could not sleep. In the vast stillness about him every sound magnified itself. He lay very still and tried to identify the slightest murmur, from the far-off cry of a night bird to the eerie sighing of the wind among the pines and cedars.

Finally he dropped into a light slumber, only to start up in sudden alertness at the long-drawn howls of a party of coyotes who were conducting an inharmonious concert in a near-by shallow canyon. Their racket awakened the others briefly. Followed an exchange of comments all around uncomplimentary to the zealous sage dogs, and quiet again settled down on the camp.

Shortly before three o'clock Kent was again wakened. This time it was by a sharp, cracking sound like the sudden break of a twig under a human foot. Kent listened breathlessly. He thought he heard a footfall or two after the cracking of the twig. The increasing moon, still sailing high in the sky, lighted the immediate space around him. Beyond the splash of light a clump of spruces loomed darkly. The base of them was thickly brushed by tangled bushes. It was from that direction the sound had come.

Kent strained his eyes but could make out nothing. Neither was the disturbing noise repeated. Thoroughly aroused, he continued to listen intently for several minutes. Following the suspicious sound unbroken silence had dropped down. Even the ubiquitous coyotes had ceased their discordant serenade. Con-

cluding that it must have been the running of one of these pests he had heard, Kent lay down again and slept until morning.

He did not mention the incident to his companions, being in wholesome dread of Hal's teasing tongue. Even Tony was likely to launch at him some good-natured but disconcerting remark. Kent still considered himself the tenderfoot of the group. While David Whitney was the only silent member of the party, he was undoubtedly as familiar with the West as Mr. Craig.

David was not a particularly desirable addition to the outfit. He still continued to shut himself up in his shell. What little he had to say was usually said to Hartwell Craig. Asked a question by any of the others, he answered it with curt brevity. He took no part whatever in the merry "ragging" which went on continually among the four other lads. Once or twice Hal had directed a playful shot at him and had been rebuffed by a scowl or else stolid silence. Lovable to the last degree, Hal was human enough to take offense. Thus before the trailers had been twenty-four hours on the way an indefinable hostility had sprung up between high-spirited, impatient Hal and silent, frowning David.

Before seven o'clock that morning breakfast, consisting of bacon, sweet rolls, canned peaches and coffee, had been hungrily eaten and the journey resumed. The guide's shack, high in the foothills, being their objective, they were anxious to reach it by the middle of the afternoon. Greatly to Tony's surprise, David Whitney had come forward to assist him with the burros. Hal and Kent had prepared breakfast. Kent had therefore been excused by Tony from burro duty that morning. David's laconic "Might as well make myself useful," was his sole remark. He showed a skill in managing the animals which called forth approbation from Tony.

"Can you beat it?" Hal said to Kent during the breaking of camp. "That chap is the world's great mystery. He's sat or stood around like a sulky old graven image ever since we started. Now, all of a sudden, he jumps in and helps Tony to beat the band. I had an idea he was just going to be an ornament on this expedition, but he's come to life. I try to be civil to him on Craig's account, but I don't like him. *That's flat.* He and I will have a row before we get back home. See if we don't. He makes me weary."

"Oh, I wouldn't think about him at all,"

Kent returned in his sunny fashion. "Just leave him alone and after a while he will be all right. If I were you I wouldn't tease him. Take it out on the rest of us. We like it. He doesn't."

"He'll have to get used to it then." Hal spoke with a tinge of belligerence. "I won't make a mark of him, but I'm likely to kid him a little without thinking—also for the good of his health," he added with laughing mischief.

David was evidently of a mind to keep out of Hal's way. He rode behind the burros with Tony that morning, silent and unresponsive. He had discovered that Tony was what the Spanish term "simpatico." The Mexican boy left him to his own musings with a kindly tact which he understood and for which he was grateful.

Well into the foothills the trail became narrow and winding, but not too rough and was thus easy to follow. It trended upward by almost imperceptible degrees. At one o'clock the first halt of the day was made for a hasty luncheon. The outfit had still some distance to go before reaching the guide's shack, and Mr. Craig purposed to make it in broad daylight. This necessitated steady traveling and few stops.

Kent and George set to work and prepared huge sandwiches of canned corned beef and bread. They still had several loaves of this precious commodity on hand. Hal built a fire and Mr. Craig made the coffee. David pleasantly surprised them by producing a bag of oranges from his kit and handing the ripe luscious fruit around.

At a few minutes past four a concerted shout went up from the riders. Far up the trail they had sighted the guide's shack. It was a weather-beaten affair nestling between two high, thickly-wooded hills. It stood on a little plateau perhaps half a mile distant but well above their heads. The approach to it was as stiff a bit of trail as the party had found thus far. Nearing it, the tiny but short-cropped green lawn claimed the boys' wondering attention. More, the shack boasted of a small rustic front porch over which clambered a white rose in full bloom. A trim path led up to the low step of the shack, on each side of it flourished a border of brilliant scarlet sage.

"Some civilized guy!" Hal's puckered lips emitted a loud shrill whistle. "Just as good as we have at home, only on a smaller scale!"

His whistle carried to the shack. A figure appeared in the open doorway, then stepped slowly out to the edge of the porch.

"That's Norton! No, it isn't!" George contradicted himself. "That's—why, that looks to me like an Indian!"

"It is so," confirmed Tony, who had ridden up beside the others, briefly, leaving David to manage the burros.

"Can you make him out, Antonio?" asked the ranchman. "Do you recognize him? You know so many of these Indians in this part of the country."

"No." Tony shook his head. "He is not known to me."

"Mr. Norton must be at home or that Indian wouldn't be standing there in the open doorway," surmised Kent.

"I'm not so sure about that," returned Hal. Then he laughed. "I remember one time Dad invited an old Indian chief named Fleet Partridge to bring his family and make us a visit. Well, they arrived one day when no one was home. It was the day before the Fourth of July and Tah Fom and the maids had been let loose for a week end. The Fleet Partridge outfit piled into the patio and established themselves. There were ten of 'em altogether and they cooked and feasted on our grub and had a high old time. When we got home two days after the Fourth, Tah Fom

was still missing and the maids had gone to live at one of the overseers' houses. They were scared silly at our company. The company had got out that morning, too, and left us their card. The card was a smooth piece of wood stuck up in the middle of the patio. One of Fleet Partridge's sons could print a little. He'd printed on the wood, 'Ben her, thank, Flet Partige.' They hadn't hurt anything, only they had left the kitchen in an awful mess. Tah Fom chattered pigeon English for a week while he washed dishes and cleaned up."

"I thought an Indian was too proud to do anything like that," smiled Kent.

"They are, the best of 'em—*unless* you invite 'em. Then they own your house while they are in it," explained Hal. "It didn't make a bit of difference to Fleet Partridge whether we were at home or not. He'd been invited to make us a visit and he made it when he got good and ready. Catch him setting foot in our house, though, without an invitation. That's the way they are."

During Hal's narration the party had been steadily drawing nearer to the shack. They could make out the Indian plainly now; a tall straight figure in a pair of buckskin trousers

and a khaki-colored shirt, well open at the throat. One long black lock of hair hung over his left shoulder. He had unusually high cheek bones and his prominent nose gave him a hawk-like look. He stood perfectly still, his sharp black eyes intently watching the oncoming invasion.

"How!" hallooed Hal, cupped hands to his mouth.

The Indian raised one hand in a kind of slow dignified salute. Very slowly he advanced down the sage-bordered walk.

The ponies had scrambled hardily up the last steep stretch to the plateau. At the right of the patch of green lawn was a narrow roadway evidently designed for the use of horsemen. Into this the arrivals turned.

Silently the Indian crossed the lawn and brought up beside them as they halted on the narrow driveway. His piercing black eyes took in the whole party at a glance. They rested last and inquiringly on Mr. Craig.

"How are you?" greeted the ranchman pleasantly. "Is Mr. Norton at home?"

"Good," was the unemotional response. "He is not home."

"But he was here as late as yesterday, was he not?" anxiously pursued the ranchman.

"Yes. Now gone, but not long."

"A-h-h!" was the relieved reply. "Glad to hear that. When do you expect him back?"

"Mebbe to-day; mebbe to-morrow. You come up; rest; wait. Pretty soon him here. I think sundown." The Indian's voice was soft in comparison to that of Shy Beaver. He possessed a haughty dignity which made its impression on his listeners.

"You are not from this part of the country," said the ranchman. "You come from the far north, don't you?"

A gleam of approval lit the black eyes at the question. "You speak true. The Sioux are my people. I come from Canada with Norton, my little father. I am Blue Claw and a chief among my people."

"I am glad to know you." The ranchman held out his hand. "I am Hartwell Craig of Mariposa Ranch." He named the rest of the group in quick succession. "My friends and I hope to secure Norton as our guide. We wish to go on up into the mountains. Do you know whether he has any other trip on hand that will prevent his taking us on?"

"He has no promise to any men," said Blue Claw deliberately. "Last night he made the talk that he will go out no more until October. My little father makes the talk but once."

CHAPTER VII

The Arrival of the Guide

"DISHED!" groaned Hal, striking one hand against the other by way of expressing his disappointment. "Just our luck. Shy Beaver's old talisman is a Jonah, I suspect. I think I'll hand it on to one of the burros." He made a move as though to pluck the offending token from his coat lapel.

The Sioux's eyes followed the movement and came to rest on the feathered trinket. It had missed his observation until now. He stepped forward and scrutinized it intently.

"Who gave?" he asked Hal.

"Shy Beaver of the Navajos. My very good friend. It is the talisman; good luck, you know," Hal glibly explained, quite forgetting he had just pronounced the ornament a Jonah.

"*You* do not believe." A smile touched the Indian's straight mouth. "I understand the Jonah. This is not. It is a great charm from the far south of here. I know not the

meaning. I know this," he touched the deeply-cut scroll, "is of the first people of the Mexico. I give to it respect. I will ask my father Norton to go to the mountains with you. You come now. Wait for him. I show the way."

"Can you beat that?" muttered George Davis to Kent. Immediately he had made this unexpected statement Blue Claw turned and started up the drive. "Gid-ap!" George commanded Caro. "For goodness' sake follow Mr. Ten Claws' lead before he changes his mind about putting our case up to the boss."

"If Ten Claws gets Norton to change his mind I'll have this charm riveted to my coat with copper wire and a fence built around it," jubilantly declared Hal. "Excuse me for calling you names." He turned his eye waggishly upon his heretofore unappreciated treasure.

"There seems to be a kind of brotherhood amongst these Indians," the ranchman said to David. "I wonder how Shy Beaver came by that relic?"

"Hard to say," was the brief response. David's face had fallen perceptibly at the information that Norton would go out on the trail no more that summer. His own gloomy

thoughts were uppermost in his brain. He was not specially interested in the talisman.

"Cheer up, boy." The ranchman had caught the dejection in the lad's tones. "Try to put worry from you. Even if Norton doesn't take us out, we won't turn back. You are safe enough up here. By the time we return I believe Hillard will have everything straight for you so you can stay at Mariposa indefinitely."

"I hope so," sighed David. "You don't know my uncle as I do, Mr. Craig. He's like a bloodhound. He never gives up."

"Well, he's not likely to trace you even as far as my ranch."

"He knows you are my friend," reminded David. "That's why he wouldn't let me go back the next summer and work for you. He saw you liked me. He never wanted me to have any friends."

The two had no chance for further private talk. The party had ridden past the shack and onto an open grassy space behind it, ideal for picketing the ponies and burros.

Tony's first act was to ease the burros of their load so that the patient little animals would have a free chance to enjoy themselves for a little. He took pains to tether both

ponies and burros, David helping him, to several posts he found there.

"I take no chances with them," he declared. "The ponies might stay of their own will; the burros—no. They walk and walk and eat. When we want them—where are these? Ah, *comprendo muy bueno* [I understand very well]!" he exclaimed, shaking an accusing finger at the irresponsible beasts.

Dismounted, the others had followed Blue Claw back to the shack. Tony had urged them to go on, promising to join them directly. David had lingered to help him.

They found the large square room into which the Indian invited them in keeping with the neat lawn and flower borders. The floor was of hard wood and stained dark brown. Two bear skins, one black, one brown, and an Indian blanket of unusual beauty of color decorated the floor. Two pairs of buck antlers were fastened up on each side of a deep fireplace. Between them hung a rifle of particularly fine make and workmanship. It instantly challenged the boys' admiring attention. On the other sides of the big room were hung smaller skins of wolf, beaver and black and silver fox. In one corner stood a fairly high, closed desk. Above it hung an

oil portrait of a very beautiful young woman with a dark, sad, sensitive face. It showed head and shoulders only, and the pose verged toward a profile.

An old walnut library table with huge carved legs, a set of open walnut book shelves and a number of large comfortable chairs completed the main furnishings of the picturesque room. The table was littered with magazines, a tall green-shaded oil lamp occupying the center. The book shelves were well filled with leather and cloth bindings.

Turned loose in the guide's living room until such time as he should appear, the boys amused themselves with making a polite inspection of the apartment. Boylike, the hunting trophies interested them most. Kent, however, found himself turning back a second time to survey the young woman of the portrait. There was something vaguely familiar about her face. David's eyes had brightened at sight of the litter of magazines on the table. After a brief walk about the room he had drawn a chair up to the table and was soon deeply engrossed in their contents.

Glad of an opportunity for relaxation, the ranchman soon seated himself in a splint-

bottomed rocker near the window. Resting his head against the high back, he briefly closed his eyes and dozed. The temptation to closely examine the rifle on the wall becoming irresistible, Hal carefully lifted it down. Soon he and George and Tony were exclaiming noisily over its perfection as they inspected it minutely.

"It's really light weight for that kind of gun," Hal commented. "I can swing it against my shoulder like lightning." He illustrated his quickness, playfully pointing the weapon at George with: "Throw up your hands!"

The suddenness of the move startled lengthy George. He took a stumbling backward step, lost his balance and landed with a jarring crash, partly against David, partly against the library table. The magazine flew from David's hand. It stuck the green lamp shade at the same instant in which David attempted to recover it. His frantic movement resulted only in pitching the lamp over on its side. A shattering of glass told its own story as the green shade struck the floor. The lamp followed it. Made of heavy glass, it did not break, but merely rolled over once or twice and remained stationary.

An instant of awful silence followed the catastrophe. Mr. Craig sat up with a start and blinked disapprovingly at his flock.

"What kind of performance—" he began.

"Now we have been and gone and disgraced ourselves!" Hal cried out ruefully.

"It was your fault!" flashed forth David angrily. "You had no business to swing that gun, even in fun! Nice show we will have of getting Norton now!" He sprang to his feet, glaring disapproval at Hal.

"Don't you suppose I *know* it was my fault? Did I say it *wasn't?*" hotly demanded Hal. "I'm not blaming anyone but myself. What kind of fellow do you think I am?"

"Don't talk to me. Let me alone," muttered David. Going to the other side of the table, he busied himself in raising the lamp from the floor.

"No one wants to talk to such a grouch as you," retaliated Hal with sarcasm. "Don't worry. *You* won't be blamed for what's happened, anyway. I'm not *quite* so mean as all that."

"Boys, boy!" remonstrated Mr. Craig sternly. "Enough of this. If you are going to quarrel we had better turn back at once."

"I have nothing more to say to him," shrugged Hal, emphasizing the "him."

"I certainly don't care to talk to Brent," glowered David. "You needn't worry about my quarreling with him again. Let him keep away from me. That's all I ask."

Kent, who had been mildly interested in exploring the bookcase, stood viewing the belligerents and the catastrophe in troubled amazement. It had all happened so quickly. An open volume on Travels in Thibet in his hand, he did not notice that a small photograph had fallen from it to the floor.

And at this particularly unpropitious moment in walked the guide.

CHAPTER VIII

To Go or Not to Go

IT was not more than a minute after his entrance before he spoke. It seemed at least ten to the embarrassed assemblage. Hal still held the rifle and David the lamp. On opposite sides of the table from each other one might almost have thought an impromptu duel was about to be fought. The faces of both lads were dark with resentment. George was looking hopelessly conscience-stricken over his part in the affair. Mr. Craig was the picture of righteous vexation.

"Good afternoon." The Nevada hermit's tones spelled dry inquiry. Tall, lean, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, brown-eyed and tanned, he made an impressive figure as he stood searchingly inspecting his uninvited visitors.

"Good afternoon." It was the ranchman who responded to the salutation. "I don't know what you will think of us. We have just had an unfortunate accident," he continued with apologetic frankness.

"So I see. Well, it doesn't matter about the lamp shade. I have another somewhere about the shack. My rifle—kindly put it where it belongs. I don't like anyone but myself to handle *that*." This last with cool decision.

"I haven't done it any harm. I shouldn't have touched it. It was such a beautiful fire-arm we couldn't resist a closer look at it. I hope you will pardon me." Hal spoke rather stiffly. He was chagrined at his unpleasant position. Still he did not intend to give too much ground.

The guide nodded without speaking. David had already set the denuded lamp back on the table. Kent was in the act of replacing the book in its shelf when the guide addressed him.

"Did that photograph on the floor at your feet fall from the book you just replaced?" he questioned. "I had been hunting it for some time."

"I hadn't noticed it until you called my attention to it." His face scarlet, Kent stooped, retrieved the photograph and offered it to its owner. As he did so he noted that the photographed face was that of the young woman of the painting.

"That is a picture of my sister," the guide said tersely. "She has been dead many years. I value it highly. I must have placed it there and forgotten that I did so."

He turned abruptly from Kent, the picture in his hand. In his navy-blue flannel shirt, corduroy trousers, high-laced boots and black sombrero he was a survival of the early romantic West. His hair showed brown and glossy from under his sombrero, though he was in his late forties. His thin square-jawed face with its long straight nose and well-cut mouth was full of stubborn strength.

"Well, gentlemen," he used the same terse tone, "what is your business with me?" Again his eyes leaped from face to face. Coming to David he stared fixedly at him.

David reddened under the scrutiny of those keen dark eyes, but returned the gaze squarely.

"I am Hartwell Craig," introduced the ranchman. "Mariposa Ranch is my home. I heard you were in this part of the country again. We are out on a trip through the mountains and hope to secure your valuable services as guide." Mr. Craig came directly to the point.

Before the ranchman finished speaking the guide had begun to shake his head.

"I don't care to make the trip," he abruptly refused. "I have just come from a long tiresome jaunt through Canada."

"So your friend Blue Claw told us. We saw him, and he kindly invited us to wait for you. He warned us that you would not go out again on the trail, but I rather hoped against hope." His great disappointment showed itself on the ranchman's face.

"I don't want to go. I have a good deal to see to at my shack. I've been away for five months. Besides—well, I don't care to go. That's all." The Nevada hermit delivered his ultimatum with a touch of indifference.

"Sorry you won't go with us." In his vexed disappointment over the refusal the ranchman forgot all about introducing his charges to the guide. He was signally provoked with them for the recent accident. He surmised that it had figured largely in influencing Norton to refusal. "We must be on our way. We must find a good camping spot while it is still light."

"Better stay here to-night," was the surprising answer. "There is a windstorm on the way. It will strike this section before dark. I have a number of cots. They can be brought in here; also plenty to eat. You are welcome to remain."

"I'd like to stay if only to show Mr. Norton we aren't a bunch of roughnecks," Hal contritely broke into the conversation. He was hard hit by his part in the recent mischief done.

"I'll take your word for it." The guide glanced at Hal with a half smile. "I'll ask you to excuse me now." He again addressed Mr. Craig. "I have not seen Blue Claw since I came in."

Left to themselves, the party could only wonder if the guide were greatly displeased. He did not approve of them, or so they were inclined to believe. Hardly had Norton left the room when David went to the ranchman and began talking to him in an undertone. His dark features showed lively apprehension. Nor did the older man's low, soothing replies appear to reassure him.

Hal, Kent, George and Tony gathered in one corner of the room and discussed the situation in low voices.

"Blue Claw could talk his head off now to Norton and get turned down," growled Hal to his chums. "It's all my fault. Craig was so sore at us he wouldn't even introduce us to his nibs. Don't blame him. I know he thinks he could have won Norton over if it

hadn't been for the smash-up. Then I made things worse by fussing with Whitney. I'm a nice piece of work, I am."

"I'm to blame for falling all over myself," deplored George.

"Well, I was rooting through his bookcase," said Kent sheepishly. "Tony is the only innocent lamb in this gang."

"*Si*," grinned Antonio, "I am the angel, but I get the blame anyhow."

The guide's sudden re-entrance into the room brought every pair of eyes to bear eagerly upon him. His impassive countenance gave no clew as to the potency of Blue Claw's promised kindly offices.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Norton," were the ranchman's first words. "I was so greatly put out with these boys for their mischief I forgot to introduce them. I'll do so now."

The guide shook hands with each lad. He remembered George and his talk with him at the station, much to George's embarrassed delight.

A gleam of repressed humor leaped into his brown eyes as he took Hal by the hand. Hal sensed rather than saw it and began to feel a trifle less abashed. Summoning all his boyish temerity he said: "You took my father on a

mountain trip once. I wish you would change your mind about taking on our outfit."

"I remember that trip very well. Your father is a born woodsman. How is he, may I ask?" Norton provokingly chose to ignore Hal's plea.

Hal answered the question with a sudden reserve which sprang from hurt pride. He had spoken on impulse and been snubbed. While he accepted the snub as merited, it galled none the less.

David was last to meet the guide. Hearing his name, a curious change came into Norton's face. A close observer would have said he had met with an unexpected shock. His lips tightened and his heavy brows contracted sharply.

"David Whitney?" he repeated. "What's your father's name?"

"My father is dead. He died when I was three. His name was Alfred Whitney." David jerked out this information with a scowl. Involuntarily he cast protesting eyes toward the ranchman, as though begging him to stop the inquisition.

The ranchman did not catch the mute protest. He was watching the guide.

"And your mother's name—her Christian

name, I mean," pursued the guide after an instant's meditative silence. He was still staring intently at the uncomfortable David. "Were you born in the West or—" he paused, "or in the East?" His voice dropped a little on the last word.

"I was born in Vermont. My mother's name was Isabel. She died three months after I was born. I was brought up by—relatives. That's all I can tell you of my family history." David added this with stiff finality.

"Humph!" Gilbert Norton stood eyeing the boy for a long moment. With a sudden swing of his long body he turned and strode from the room, leaving a nonplussed group behind him.

CHAPTER IX

The Guide Reconsiders

"I'M going back, Mr. Craig," burst from David, the moment after the guide had disappeared. "It's just as I thought. That man is—"

"Now, now, boy," expostulated the ranchman, "stop borrowing trouble! I'm sure Norton has nothing to do with—"

"Never mind," David cut in with unintentional rudeness. "I shouldn't have spoken." He left the library table near which he had been standing and walked moodily to the window. He stopped there, his back to the others, and looked unseeingly out on the tiny green lawn.

An awkward silence followed the little scene. The four chums had long since agreed that there was a mystery about David which only Mr. Craig knew. He had never seen fit to refer to David save impersonally. The boys had considered it none of their business and had never asked questions.

"What are we going to do, Mr. Craig?"

questioned Hal, tactfully putting forward the affairs of the outfit. "Are we going to stay here to-night or go on? You haven't said."

"I know, Hal. I have been trying to decide. It's as Norton says about that wind storm. I noticed mares' tails in the sky early this afternoon. We'd better stay, I suppose. I hate to bother Norton," he gloomily added.

"I don't think he minds our staying," said Hal. "He seems truly hospitable. Maybe he'll give us a few pointers about our route, even if he won't take us on."

"I considered that, too," nodded Mr. Craig. "We'd best stay, I believe. While these wind storms are of short duration, I am satisfied to be housed during this one."

"Ask the Señor Norton for the plan for us to follow and I will then be the guide," jestingly proposed Tony. "You will have good reason to admire me." He was attempting to lift the gloom of the situation.

"What will become of your beloved burros?" quizzed George. "Have a heart! Don't leave those plugs to our tender care."

"Kent may have charge of these," calmly arranged Tony. "He is very fond of them. He can make them go when even I can not."

This raised a laugh. That very morning

Kent had succeeded in rousing one of the burros to action after Tony had failed.

"Whew!" It was Kent who exclaimed. A strong puff of wind had set the panes of the half open windows to rattling. It fluttered the leaves of the magazines on the table, blew a sheaf of papers from the top of the high desk and whisked them about the room.

"Some force to that wind!" George cried out as the strong breeze struck coldly on the back of his neck.

"I'm going outside to watch that little gale," declared Hal, as the boys finished collecting the scattered papers and replaced them on the desk, with a book for a weight. "I haven't seen a good, peppy wind storm for ages. We have 'em down our way once in a while, but we're sheltered there compared to this, aren't we, Mr. Craig?"

"Decidedly," returned the ranchman. "Better not venture far from the porch when the tempest strikes. You are likely to be blown off this plateau."

The entrance of Norton deterred the chums momentarily from going out to view the oncoming storm. Halfway to the door they paused respectfully to listen to him.

"Supper will soon be ready," he said. His

calm face showed no trace of his recent agitation. "After supper I will talk with you further about your route on the trip you propose to take."

As he spoke he cast a curious glance toward David. The latter had not stirred from his position at the window. He paid no more attention to his host than if he had not been there. Followed a brief exchange of remarks between the ranchman and the guide, then the latter went back to the kitchen.

Bent on going outside, the chums started for the door again, Hal in the lead.

Kent glanced toward the tall slim figure at the window. "Coming with us, Whitney?" he asked kindly. Like Tony he was inclined toward sympathy for the odd youth.

"No. You won't stay out long when that storm strikes." David did not even turn his head as he made reply, although he made an effort at civility.

Kent was ready to believe this before his head was fairly out the cabin door. A blast of cold air struck him, almost taking his breath. Far above the shack where the real mountains began the wind shrieked and roared among the trees and whistled and wailed through countless gaps and canyons. The

fury of the storm had not yet reached the foothills, but it was fast approaching.

"Suppose we were up on a mountain ledge when one of these playful little tempests caught up with us?" shouted Hal. "Bing! One perfectly good outfit zipped into space."

"Say not so. I'd hunt a cave in time," George shouted back. "I'm going to beat it in again. I like this place. I'm not crazy to be whisked off it. Think of having a pleasant outing spoiled by a naughty, naughty wind!"

Endeavoring to show his contempt for the gale, Tony walked boldly forth, was blown half way across the lawn and fought his way back to the porch with difficulty.

"*Mi madre!*" he exclaimed. "I am for the inside of the shack. Ah, my ponies, poor ones, and even the burros! I hope the posts hold. I can do nothing for them."

"Will they be hurt?" asked Kent anxiously.

"No; they know what to do. They will stand the storm. I have been in many of these, but never before in one when so high up."

Driven indoors by the increasing gale, the boys marveled at the sturdy build of the shack. It was scarcely shaken by the wind's

wild buffeting. From outside the sharp cracking of tree branches, mingled with the heavier crashing of tree trunks snapped like pipestems, continually assaulted their ears. Now and then a thunderous detonation told of a giant boulder dislodged from its ancient resting place to hurtle down the more distant steep hillsides. The guide's shack occupied a position of safety from any such menace.

With the drawing on of twilight the gale had spent itself. The wind had simmered down to a long, lugubrious, moaning whistle. A light rain misted the windows for a little, then ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

From the kitchen the savory fragrance of broiling steak tickled the hungry company's nostrils. The aroma of coffee and frying potatoes added to their tantalization.

"Oh, *gee*, how I wish that grub was ready," sighed Hal. "That's venison steak or I'm no judge of good eats."

Almost incidental with his expressed wish the guide appeared with, "Supper; come and get it," and led the way into the kitchen. It was nearly as large as the living room and also boasted a deep fireplace. A huge oak settle took up the greater part of one side of the kitchen. There was a long table, several

wooden benches and in one corner of the room a practical four-burner oil stove. From this proceeded the pleasant odors which had assailed the company's noses.

With the assistance of Blue Claw the guide soon had supper on the table, smoking hot. As Hal had guessed, venison steak formed the main dish. Flanked by crisp fried potatoes, hot biscuits and two combs of wild honey, with the added comfort of a large pot of strong coffee, the visitors feasted.

A large share of the air of constraint which had hung over the party after the guide's first appearance on the scene vanished at his hospitable board. Even David lost his attitude of deep gloom and ate his supper like a hungry boy rather than a young misanthrope. Several times the guide addressed him as though trying to draw him out. David declined, however, to be led into conversation, making the briefest of replies.

Supper over, they still sat about the table listening to Norton, who volunteered all sorts of valuable information concerning the region which they were about to invade.

"I would like to ask you if there is any particular reason you may know why we should keep away from those mountains?"

inquired Hartwell Craig. "Shy Beaver, an Indian friend of Hal's, warned him against them. He was quite upset about it. He claims that White Shadow, a Yaqui chief, is fighting bad spirits up there." The ranchman laughed as he made this statement.

"I know Shy Beaver," returned the guide, smiling a little. "It is a long time since I have seen him. To tell you the truth, there is something unusual going on in those mountains and has been for quite a time. I think the Indians are at the bottom of it, but I can't say. The cowboys and sheep men around this region say the mountains are haunted and won't venture near them. They claim they have heard supernatural voices up there and have been chased by phantoms. They swear they could hear them walk but could see no one."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed the ranchman. "What do you make of it?"

"I haven't thought about it much. I daresay the spooks and their spookings can be explained on a very human basis. As I said, I lay the whole thing to the Indians."

"Have you heard of any one being hurt who ventured up there?" was the anxious question. "I'm responsible for the welfare of these boys,

you know. I don't wish to run them into any malicious, hidden danger."

"I don't know what the layout is at present," the guide replied. "I heard these rumors five months ago, at the time I was getting ready to go to Canada. There had been no killings at that time."

"Oh, we don't mind a little excitement," said Hal cheerfully, his eyes very bright. The idea of hidden danger appealed immensely to his daring fancy.

Blue Claw had listened attentively to all that was being said. Now he volunteered an opinion.

"White Shadow is a great chief," he said. "He is good. He would do no one hurt. Him I don't know, but I have heard."

"Was it White Shadow who gave you that affair on your coat?" asked the guide of Hal. "Blue Claw says it is a great charm against evil."

"No; Shy Beaver gave me this on the morning we left the ranch. I don't think White Shadow had anything to do with sending it. Old S. B. picked it up somewhere on his travels and passed it on to me. Tony says it is old Mexican and rare."

"Humph!" Norton leaned his elbows on

the table, chin in hand. He glanced thoughtfully from one youthful face to another. He looked last and longest at David.

"I have been thinking the matter over," he said slowly. "I have changed my mind about not going with you. I intend to join your outfit after all. How long do you expect to be gone?"

"Not longer than till the first of September. We hope to be back home by the fifth," answered Mr. Craig, hardly daring to believe he had heard aright.

"That will suit me. I can start to-morrow morning. The sooner we take the trail, the more territory you will get over in the given time. Blue Claw will stay here and run the shack. He has some work of his own that he wishes to do. As soon as it's daylight I'll run over your stuff and see if you've everything you need. The best thing you can all do now is turn in. Up at five, we can start by seven. We'll be on the trail all day to-morrow. I want to reach a certain place before dark to-morrow night."

"Hooray!" Hal the irrepressible was on his feet. "What's the matter with Norton?" he yelled. "He's all right!"

By this time the three other boys were

standing up cheering lustily. The ranchman boyishly followed their example, glad to shout out his own satisfaction at the swift favorable turn matters had taken. David rose also, but remained mute. His eyes straying to the guide's, he surveyed the bronzed face fixedly, as though asking the older man a question. Norton returned the inquiring look squarely. His somewhat austere features softened into a kindly expression which drove out the suspicious glint in the boy's dark eyes. His mute question had been not only understood but answered to his satisfaction.

CHAPTER X

From Out of the Darkness

IT was a jubilantly confident company that took the trail from the guide's shack at seven o'clock the next morning. With Norton, the Nevada hermit, riding at the head of the expedition on a bright chestnut pony, the way had opened gloriously.

"It's the long, long trail for us this time and no more setbacks," Kent told Hal as the two rode side by side for a little way, the width of the trail permitting.

"You had better believe it is," rejoined Hal. "At last we are really going some. We're the long trail boys and no mistake. Norton won't let the grass grow under *our* feet. We're due to cover a lot of ground in the next four or five weeks."

"That's a pretty good name for us: The Long Trail Boys." Kent repeated the name with approval. "Say we keep it."

"It sounds good to me. It sounds like the beginning of a lot more hikes together. I mean for you, Tony, George and myself. I'm

not crazy about including Whitney. He hasn't spoken to me since yesterday after the grand smash. I certainly haven't worried about it or spoken to him, either. I was a little bit sorry on Craig's account, but that's all. I'd like to have Craig go out with us next summer on another trip somewhere, but not that lemon." Hal's face clouded momentarily. He felt that he disliked David more than ever.

"I'm sorry for him," Kent said soberly. "He's either in hard luck or else he must have had something unpleasant happen to him before he came to Mariposa Ranch. I think he's a pretty good fellow at heart or Mr. Craig wouldn't have taken him up and been his friend."

"Don't doubt that. Don't like him just the same." Hal's unfriendly feeling toward Hartwell Craig's protégé was not to be changed.

"Norton seems to be interested in him," Kent observed. "Last night at supper I noticed him looking at Whitney two or three times with the same kind of queer expression as when Mr. Craig introduced Whitney to him."

"That so?" commented Hal. "I was too busy eating to get that."

A loud call from the rear sent Kent riding back to see what Tony wanted. One of the burros had decided to leave the outfit and blaze his own trail. The animal had bolted off the trail and clambered up a fairly steep bank to a thicket of small saplings. Loaded with most of the cooking utensils, these had not been so securely repacked on the burro as at the start. Result, the beast scrambled up the steep, showering this useful paraphernalia behind him as he greedily grabbed at the succulent green leaves around him.

"Oh, Kent, you will mind these?" mirthfully entreated Tony, waving an arm toward the rest of his flock. "This one will get the good beating from me before I am done with him."

"I'll do better than that. I'll make Hal tend the burros and I'll help you."

Kent hallooed for Hal, who cantered back and accepted his task with derisive hoots at Tony. "My, but you have splendid control over these beasts!" he gibed. "Next time ask me to help you load. I'll guarantee the stuff'll stay where it's put."

"We will bring you the stuff when we find it, then we shall see what you can do," retorted Tony. Swooping down on the feasting

runaway, he headed the animal down hill with one powerful jerk. Waving his hands and shouting indignant Spanish, he chased the burro back to the trail.

Kent, in the meantime was laboriously climbing the steep bank, garnering cooking utensils as he went. Above him was a dense overgrowth of silver spruce and aspens. Some untoward impulse, he knew not what, caused him suddenly to straighten up and peer sharply to the left.

"What —?" Kent stared hard. The frying pan he had essayed to pick up dropped from his half hold and rolled down hill with a clang. From the close leafy screen Kent had seen a face partly reveal itself. It was a long, yellowish-white face with glittering black eyes. The instant he spied it it disappeared without having so much as rustled a leaf.

Curiosity to the front, Kent laid down his armful of pots and pans, bounded up the hill and into the thicket where the face had just shown itself. No sign of a human presence was visible. He went a few steps farther, glancing eagerly about him. He half decided to call out and challenge the unknown watcher, then thought silence wiser. Whether the sinister face had been that of an Indian or a

white man he could not judge. The only thing it reminded him of was an Egyptian mummy he had once seen in a museum.

Tardily realizing he must go back to the outfit at once, Kent retraced his steps, gathered up his load and hurried down to the trail. He and Tony had left their ponies with Hal when setting out to chase the burro. The rest of the party, excepting Hal and the ponies, had gone on. Tony had just finished giving the promised beating to the unruly burro. Aided by Hal he was now calmly reloading the chastened animal.

"I saw spook Number One up there," were Kent's first words. He went on to describe what he had seen.

"That means there *is* something to old S. B.'s warnings!" Hal cried out excitedly. "Wouldn't it be great if we could ferret out the whole puzzle? We'd give some of those simple cowboys and sheep men the laugh. Glad you saw that mummified phiz, Kent. It means we are not being forgotten by the spirits, bogies, rascals or whoever thinks they're running these mountains. Hope *I* see something similar before the day is over."

No more spooks presented themselves even for a brief instant's inspection that day,

however. Urged on by Norton, who wished to make a certain broad ledge, well up the mountain they were climbing, before sunset, the travelers halted only long enough at noon for a cold luncheon of dried beef sandwiches, boxed fancy crackers and cold coffee, each one having filled his water bottle from the coffee pot at the shack before the start.

The last hour's climb that afternoon before reaching the ledge was difficult in the extreme. The trail was nothing but a mere bridle path rough and rock-strewn. At times it skirted the edges of deep canyons narrowly enough to make Kent and George feel a trifle faint whenever they cast quick glances downward. Not being used to mountain climbing, they had been warned from the beginning by their more experienced companions not to look down when riding high places unless they were perfectly sure of themselves. "Leave it to your ponies to carry you safely. They know their business," Mr. Craig had counseled them.

Just at sunset the party rounded a curve and came upon their objective. It was a broad beautiful bit of tableland, dropping over the edge of a precipice in front. The back of it brought up sharply against the wooded sum-

mit of the mountain which rose at least half a mile above the ledge.

"The Long Trail Boys own the world," shouted Hal at the top of his lungs. Leaping from Silverheels' back he advanced to the edge of the precipice and made an exaggerated bow to an imaginary populace far below.

"See that you stay on top of it, then," admonished Mr. Craig. "No friendly scuffles near the edge of *that* drop."

"Now you can see where we are going." The guide pointed to the chain of mountains cresting their purple tops to the east of them. The sky was so clear that each one stood out against it in bold relief. "Count seven and you'll have our last stop. With no mishaps we'll get that far. That will be our limit. We can't tarry long in one place. We'll stay here to-night and all day to-morrow; maybe to-morrow night, too."

"Can't we go hunting to-morrow?" begged Hal. "There are bears and deer and mountain lions up here, aren't there?"

The guide nodded. "Plenty of bears and some deer. The mountain lions are no great sport. They're cowardly creatures. They aren't of more account to my mind than coyotes. If you corner one and get it good and

mad it will fight. They do plenty of yowling, but they slink away before a man with a gun."

"We may have more than wild beasts to fight before we get home," predicted Hal. "Tell the crowd what you saw this morning, Kent."

Aside from mentioning the strange face he had seen to Hal and Tony, Kent had made no further remark about it.

"That face doesn't answer the description of any I've ever seen in these parts. Curious." The guide frowned reflectively. David had flashed two alarm signals in his dark eyes until Kent had finished describing the face so far as he could. After that he looked relieved, then indifferent.

"Queer, but I thought I heard some one in the bushes the first night we made camp in the foothills," Kent continued. "I didn't like to speak of it for fear you'd all think I was nervous; being a raw tenderfoot, you know."

"We may be followed and watched by Indians the whole time," Norton said. "It wouldn't surprise me, after what you've told me. Still, they may not show themselves. They may only be trying to find out if we are

here for any particular purpose that doesn't gee with their ideas. Once they see we are only trailers on an outing, they may stop tagging us. The best thing to do is to go on about our business and pretend we don't know they are within a thousand miles of us. Be careful about taking stray shots at anything obscure. Hit one of them by mistake and you might have a horde of them after us. The western Indians are all supposed to belong on reservations. There are a lot of them footloose and free, and always will be. I'd rather deal with them any time, though, than the reservation boys who get drunk, remember they are braves and go sun dancing. Zip! Look out for trouble then! They are mighty reckless with their guns."

With this information the guide set about making camp for the night. Leading the way to the extreme right of the ledge, he presently showed the boys a good-sized cavern. It had a wide mouth and a dry rocky floor. In case of storm it would prove a perfect shelter.

"There'll be no storm to-night, though, or to-morrow either. I never saw better weather indications," he told them.

With the setting of the sun the coolness of

that high region began to make itself felt. Before darkness folded down on them the boys had gathered wood enough for a rousing camp-fire. Supper over, they sat about it, reveling in the novelty of their surroundings. Mr. Craig and the guide exchanged experiences of the trail to which the younger men listened with eager interest. Presently Hal insisted that Tony should sing. The Mexican lad sang "La Paloma" in Spanish, as well as several other Spanish songs in a strong sweet tenor. Then the four lads lifted up their voices in a robust rendering of the choruses of various popular and patriotic songs known to all of them. The harmony of their clear voices carried far out on the still night air. David did not join in the singing. He lay on the edge of the circle, both hands propping his chin, his face half in the shadow.

"Guess there's no doubt but that anybody who resides on the top of this berg knows the Long Trail Boys are here," declared George, as one of the refrains ended in a positive shout. "Talk about waking the echoes. This will keep 'em awake for a week."

"Let's wake 'em up some more," proposed Kent. "Altogether now. Who are we? Who are we? Who are we? We are, we are, we are—the *Long Trail Boys!*"

Highly pleased with their noise, the quartette repeated the question and answer at least half a dozen times.

"Why don't you join in the shouting, boy?" Noting that David had taken no part in the gleeful hubbub the guide leaned toward the young man with the kindly question.

David merely shook his head. "I can't," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "I'm not—well—not like them. They're all pals. I'm not even a friend of theirs. I don't want to butt in." Just why David should have admitted this much to a stranger he could not understand. He was not given to confidences even to Mr. Craig, his closest friend.

"I see." The guide nodded sympathetically but said no more.

The racket having subsided, an almost deathlike stillness settled down upon the night. It was broken by a sharp crack, followed by the whine of a speeding bullet. It electrified the loungers about the campfire. Norton sprang to his feet with an exclamation of angry dismay. The others were only a flash behind him. David, a hand to his right ear, was the last to get to his feet.

"Get into the cave; hurry!" ordered the guide. "Are you all right?" He turned anxiously to David. "Feel faint?"

"No. That bullet just nicked my ear. No harm done."

"Oh, Mr. Norton, *we* don't mind a little thing like *that*. We don't want to hit it for cover," pleaded valorous Hal. "We'll move out of the firelight, then no one can even wing us. We were marks with the campfire showing us up to the enemy, whoever he may be. He's certainly no gentleman to fire on a peaceful party engaged in a tuneful pursuit." Hal declined to treat the shot seriously.

"Maybe that's why he took a shot at us," suggested George. "He just couldn't stand our warbling. *Ain't* it a shame? I thought it sounded great."

"No; cover for the present," insisted the guide with a touch of sternness. "We can't judge of this night attack. No sense in being foolhardy. We'll very soon know if there is a gang after us. They won't stop at one shot. It's time to turn in, anyway."

No more shots followed as the party crossed the open space on the little plateau between the fire and the cave. Their flashlights, turned on every inch of the cave as they entered it, revealed no lurker there. The boys had piled their blankets, knapsacks and extra personal luggage there shortly after reaching the ledge. They were still piled in

a corner of the cave precisely as they had been left there.

"I'll stand guard duty tonight," volunteered the ranchman. "Some one of us ought to be on the alert for midnight marauders."

"Let me do that," requested Norton. "I have an idea that was only a stray spite shot, intended perhaps to drive us away from here. It may have been aimed at me. Too bad young Whitney got it. He sat next to me."

"Whitney got it!" came in a surprised chorus. In the excitement which had followed the shot no one save the guide had noted that David had been hit.

"Oh, I'm not hurt," David protested. "It pinged my ear. The bleeding has stopped already." He showed annoyance at being made the center of attention.

"Just the same you will bathe that ear with an antiseptic," decreed the ranchman. "Let me look at it." The others gathered about David in anxious concern.

By the aid of the flashlight he examined the slightly injured ear. As he did so David muttered in an undertone. "I don't believe that shot was meant for anyone but me, Mr. Craig. I feel sure it wasn't. I don't want to spoil the trip. I wish you would let me go back to the ranch. I can find my way."

CHAPTER XI

Hunting "On Their Own"

IN the shelter of the cave discussion ran rife as to the identity of the lurking enemy. Owing to Shy Beaver's earnest warnings, suspicion was principally directed toward the Indians. The party knew of no others who might resent their invasion of the mountains. David, alone, had another theory regarding the treacherous shot, but he kept it locked behind his set lips, save what he had muttered to Mr. Craig.

"Just the same, we can't stay mewed up in this old cave," Hal roundly objected as they prepared to turn in that night. "We've *got* to keep right on going, haven't we, Mr. Craig?"

"Naturally; but I don't relish the idea of unknown night skulkers using us for a target," returned the ranchman with a frown. "None of us have any personal fear. I'd hate to take one of you lads home across the saddle, though."

"The bullet hasn't been made yet that will hit us," Hal blithely assured.

"That's about the platform we'll have to proceed upon, I guess," interposed the guide. "We won't run home because of one shot. Of course if the shooting is kept up, we'd best turn back. It will amount to either that or track down the enemy. That would mean fighting. We didn't set out with any such idea in mind."

"Can we go hunting to-morrow?" Kent inquired anxiously.

"Some of us can; some of us will have to stay in camp." It was the ranchman who replied to this question. "We mustn't risk losing our ponies, burros, or any of our outfit, in fact."

"Better draw lots then in the morning to see who goes hunting and who stays home," suggested Hal. "Then there won't be any soreheads."

"Two men in camp will be enough, don't you think, Norton?" asked the ranchman. "That will mean me for one. I don't care to hunt."

"I'll stay in camp," suddenly volunteered David. "I don't want to go hunting."

"Are you sure of that?" Kent turned to

David. "Maybe you'll change your mind by to-morrow. If you do I'll stay in camp." Kent had an idea that David felt it incumbent upon himself to stand back for Hal and his friends.

"Any of us will stay behind if you decide you want to go, Whitney." It cost Hal an effort to make this civil speech to David. It was the first word he had spoken to the other boy since their squabble at the guide's shack.

"I don't care to go, I told you," David answered gruffly.

"*All right!*" emphasized Hal, an angry light leaping into his eyes. He was sorry he had tried to be courteous. He made up his mind not to be so foolish again.

"Leave it to morning to decide," counseled the guide. "Now let's turn in; you lads, I mean. I'll keep a lookout until three, then you can spell me, Craig, if you chose."

"By all means. I'll take the first part of the night, if you say so."

"No; go ahead and get your sleep. I'm not feeling sleepy."

Despite the disturbing incident, the Long Trail Boys found themselves ready to fall asleep the minute they rolled up in their blankets. Just outside the cave's entrance

the guide sat, his back braced against the rocky wall. He smoked reflectively, his keen eyes picking up every point in the darkness, his trained ears alert to catch every sound of the night.

When Mr. Craig relieved him shortly before three, nothing had happened. The guide had neither seen nor heard anything to indicate the presence of a human being near the camp.

"I intended to call you," he told the ranchman. "You got ahead of me."

"Yes; I set my mental alarm for three o'clock. I hit it pretty well, didn't I? How is everything?"

"Quiet. Even the coyotes have kept away. I haven't heard one howl since I've been out here. Our sharpshooter probably took a spite snipe at us and went on his way. A bad Indian will do that. That's the trick of a half-breed. They are just enough white to hate the whites, and just enough Indian to be malignant. The face Kent saw in the bushes may belong to our sniper."

"Sorry I didn't have a chance at old Shy Beaver," deplored Craig. "I might have gleaned something from him about who's who up here and why."

"I doubt it," disagreed Norton. "Indians

are very shut-mouth. Take Blue Claw, for instance. I've been his good friend for fifteen years, yet I can't get a thing from him unless he chooses to talk. I never quiz him. It wouldn't do a particle of good."

"If there are any malicious half-breeds running these mountains, then they will have White Shadow to reckon with. Maybe that's what Shy Beaver meant when he told Hal that White Shadow was over here fighting evil spirits." The ranchman seemed struck with this surmise. "They may be conducting an Indian war on a small scale up here."

"In that case these boys would have to cut their trip short," declared the guide with decision. "Indians are bad medicine when they start scrapping among themselves."

"Perhaps I did wrong in falling in with Hal's idea of riding these mountains," Mr. Craig said soberly. "I didn't attach much importance to Shy Beaver's talk. Mr. Brent, Hal's father, merely laughed at it, too. He was quite willing Hal should have his way about the trip."

"Yes, Brent is a good sport and a hardy adventurer. His boy is like him. Well, these youngsters are not worrying over this business. We won't spoil their fun if we can help it."

Dawn found the ranchman with nothing suspicious to report. The boys came whooping out of the cave with daylight's first rays and made a concerted dash for a little spring of ice cold water just below the camp. Nor was it many minutes before breakfast was in process of cooking.

Hal and Tony made the fire. George attended to the coffee. Kent fried bacon and boiled half smokes. Hal next essayed the ticklish job of making biscuits. He succeeded in smearing himself with dough and flour, dropped the tin can top he was using for a cutter into the fire and finally turned upside-down on the ground the pan of biscuits he was about to put over the fire. This raised a derisive howl from his comrades.

"Laugh, you simpletons!" he exclaimed, nevertheless laughing himself. "Go without biscuits, or make 'em yourselves. I just graduated in cooking from this outfit."

Part of the dough still remaining, Tony deftly made it up into biscuits. These turned out well, their only fault being that they were too few in number.

Breakfast eaten, and each one having washed his galvanized plate, cup, steel fork and knife at the spring, the hunting party

prepared to sally forth. It consisted of Hal, Tony, George, Kent and the guide.

"If we shouldn't make camp to-night, don't worry," Norton told the ranchman. "We have packed enough rations to do us until to-morrow night. At latest we'll return by sunset to-morrow evening. Take a look at the ponies once in awhile, just to make sure they are still there."

"Silverheels, or Caro, either, will give the alarm if anybody tries to lead 'em off," informed Hal. "If you hear old Silver's neigh rise to a screech, then leg it for the scene of action. They'll let you know in a hurry."

The hunting trail the guide had picked out led straight to the top of the mountain and down the other side. It was a stiff climb on foot to the top, though a short one.

"Gee whiz! I'll hand it to the ponies!" exclaimed George as they toiled up the steep. "They're better climbers than I."

"How many miles can we do in a day, steady hiking?" Hal asked the guide.

"About twenty, the way we'll work it," was the answer. "It will be easier going down the other side, but we'll spread out rather than go straight down the mountain side. The territory we shall cover used to be

a good deer and bear belt. Don't waste your bullets on rabbits unless you can't find anything else to bring down. To my fancy they're not specially good eating. Partridges are all right; quail, too."

"Do we have to stay in a bunch all the time? Can't we split the party? Say two of us go one way from a certain point and three of us the other? We'll get over more ground. We can easily blaze our trail and find our way back to the place we started from." Hal's voice held a pleading note. They had now reached the mountain top and halted for a consultation.

"Which of you is the best woodsman?" countered the guide.

"Tony, of course," promptly replied Hal.

"All right. You and he can try it on your own if you like. Are you sure you can follow your own trail back?" he turned to Tony.

"*Si.*" Tony's eyes sparkled. The idea appealed to him as strongly as to Hal.

"I'll take you at your word. Kent and George, you can come with me. We'll stick together until we reach a place I know about three miles roundabout down the mountain. We'll separate there, but I'll expect you two to get back to it by sundown to-night."

The spot reached which Norton had selected, the guide again impressed upon Hal and Tony the importance of returning there before darkness fell.

"Now listen," he said. Placing his fingers to his mouth he gave a long, piercing whistle. "That whistle will carry two miles, maybe farther, on a clear day like this. If you hear it, you'll know I want you specially. Fire seven shots in succession in answer and hoof it toward the sound, *pronto*. I don't say I'll hear the shots, but I may. I'll whistle for you over and over again if I need you. Keep your ears open and your eyes on the alert. That's about all, I guess."

From the point of separation, Hal and Tony went north, the others south. In each boy's heart sprang the fond hope that it might fall to his lot to bring down a bear. Kent's aspirations soared to a grizzly, although Norton had said that there were not many to be found now in the mountains.

With the excitement of hunting foremost in their minds, the sinister incident of the previous night had faded out. The guide's party saw plenty of rabbits, but let them go. They sighted a flock of running quail and these they bagged in numbers. Under the guide's

direction they cached the birds until their return. Toward noon they came upon unmistakable bear tracks near a water hole made by the flow of a little cascade into the bottom of a narrow ravine.

"It looks to me as though there'd been more than one bear here," announced Norton, as he carefully inspected the tracks in the soft mud. "There are tracks leading away from this water hole in two or three directions. One bear may have made 'em all, but I doubt it. A whole family may be summering here."

George trotted admiringly at the guide's heels. The two began to follow the broad tracks, well defined in the soft earth. Kent, more independent, followed a set that led in an opposite direction. He concluded it would do no harm for him to make this little spurt for himself. He would not lose sight of his two companions.

With the dryer earth the tracks ended abruptly. Kent spied, however, a place half way up one side of the little ravine where the soil had been scratched up as by clambering paws. Several broken bushes went to confirm his theory that the bear had climbed out of the ravine at this point.

Up scrambled Kent, well pleased with his

discovery. He cast a hasty glance back to be sure of his way when returning. He determined to see if he could pick up the bear's trail at the top of the ravine. If so he would halloo to the others and acquaint them with his discovery.

The top gained, Kent began an eager search for indications of his quarry. Here the trees grew thickly and for some distance back from the edge of the ravine. Beyond the belt of trees Kent saw an open sunny space, thick with low bushes. He also spied more than that. Half concealed by a circle of bushes, he glimpsed a huge, furry upright form.

He was sure he could hear his own heart thump as he moved cautiously forward toward the pale brown bulk half screened from him. His idea was to get a more accurate line on the bear before bringing his gun to his shoulder. He set his feet down with infinite care, striving to move without sound. The bear, Kent noted, as he drew slowly nearer, stood leisurely stripping a berry bush.

Finally Kent paused and made ready to fire. He smiled to himself as he thought of how easily he had found the big fellow. He felt fairly sure of bringing the beast down. He had won prizes at target practice, both at prep school and in his own town.

Incidental with his pause the bear stopped eating and began sniffing the air. His head moved slowly from side to side, but his keen little eyes were on the alert. Next instant the animal had dropped on all fours and made off through the bushes.

Kent cried out in sheer vexation. Quick as thought he sent one shot after the vanishing beast, then took up the chase. He had forgotten everything save that the largest bear he had ever seen, the first, in fact, he had seen outside a circus, was getting away from him.

Always a swift runner, Kent now tore through the bushes at top speed. At first he lost sight of his quarry, though he could hear the animal crashing through the underbrush. Presently he sighted the bear again, trotting down the face of a little slope. It seemed to Kent that the animal slackened speed. To his intense surprise it rose on its hind legs, took another shrewd glance around and trotted off again.

This time it led him into a copse of saplings which ended in a wide bramble patch, well nigh impenetrable. He could not stop now to take aim and fire for fear of losing sight of his prey entirely. He would have to keep on going until he caught the beast in a more open space.

Kent lost all track of time as he continued the pursuit. Neither had he blazed his trail. He dashed madly through the brambles, teeth set, eyes never leaving his objective for an instant. On went pursuer and pursued, at a far greater rate of speed and over a great deal more territory than Kent was aware of. His breath finally becoming a trifle labored, Kent began to realize that he was giving out. And with that dismaying realization came the double chagrin that he had suddenly lost sight of the bear. It had somehow eluded him and disappeared before his very eyes.

CHAPTER XII

Lost—A Tenderfoot

"TALK about punk luck!" Kent wiped his dripping face with his handkerchief, took a long breath and hurried on in the direction he had last seen the bear.

Very soon he understood the animal's sudden disappearance. What looked like a continued stretch of ground suddenly broke off short at the edge of a wide, shallow canyon, the bottom of which was a dry water bed. The sides, not very steep, were fringed with willows and aspens. Climbing the farther one, Kent saw a lightish brown form now very nearly at the top.

"Got you!" he yelled and sent a bullet to intercept Bruin's hill-climbing career. He thought he hit the animal but was not sure. He saw it quicken its pace and gain the top of the farther bank. He fired again as it stood poised for a second on the higher ground. This time he missed.

"I've forgotten how to shoot," he told him-

self in disgust as he plunged down into the canyon and made for its opposite side. In his hurry he all but trod on a rattler. The reptile set up a furious rattling and rose up to do battle. Kent paid no attention to it. He had killed several since the beginning of the trip and was not much impressed by the sight of one.

Just as his head came on a level with the tree-lined bank he was endeavoring to reach, he heard a sound which made his blood tingle. It was a kind of half roaring growl.

"I'll bet I winged him and he's mad as hops," was Kent's instant conclusion.

His feet on even ground again, he peered sharply ahead. A sight met his gaze that almost took his breath. Some distance below the bordering trees among which he stood was a round sunlit space, almost clear of bushes. Here the grass grew thick and short. In the middle of it stood Kent's bear. His great head was raised and every gleaming tooth bared. Advancing upon him was an immense black bear. The spot formed a natural amphitheatre, and here, it appeared, a bloody conflict was about to take place.

Fascinated by the sight, Kent made no effort to use his gun. He was sure as he gazed

at the bear he had been chasing that the beast was a grizzly. It was not like the ordinary brown bear and it was far too large for a cinnamon bear. He had heard that the grizzly would fiercely contest the ground with another bear. He was now to have proof of this.

For all the world like two boxers, the fighting pair circled warily about each other looking for an opening. The black bear, plainly the aggressor, was a larger and more powerful animal than the grizzly. More, he appeared to have a grudge of long standing against his adversary. He was plainly at the height of temper and growling fiercely. The grizzly, thus surprised, was gathering his own ample store of ill-nature together to vent it on his enemy.

Kent had heard often that a black or brown bear would seldom attack a grizzly. He had also read that bears would hold grudges against one another as long and as resentfully as would human beings.

It was plain to be seen, he thought, that the black bear was no coward. He thrilled with the knowledge that he was almost sure of killing both beasts. Still, for the life of him, he could not bring such a summary end to the

fight. He burned to see this battle of the wild.

Snarling wickedly, the two bears drew nearer to each other. Suddenly, with a roar of rage that awoke the echoes, the grizzly launched himself straight at his enemy. The assault almost threw the black bear, but not quite. He managed to keep his footing. His tremendous forepaws crushingly embraced his enemy, his claws digging deep into the grizzly's flesh. The grizzly in turn sank his teeth into his adversary's shoulder, and thus the two locked in a death embrace swayed and gyrated about the grass plot, filling the quiet air with the sounds of their primal hate.

Kent watched breathlessly, unable to tell which one of the infuriated animals had the advantage. It was his belief that, let alone to finish the fight, the grizzly would win in the long run. His natural ferociousness was in his favor. He showed the same tenacity of purpose which a bulldog exhibits in a fight with another breed of dog.

While Kent stood, a solitary spectator to the conflict, it came over him in a disconcerting wave that he had absolutely disregarded the guide's orders. He was forced to wonder ruefully how far he had come. George and

Norton must have long since returned to the water hole. It had not been the guide's intention to go far away from it.

Guiltily he drew his watch from an upper pocket of his shooting coat. He gasped in consternation as he saw the time. It was ten minutes to four. He hastily replaced the timepiece and raised his gun. It was his privilege to end the savage contest which continued unflaggingly, provided his marksmanship was not at fault.

Over and over again he sighted the swaying pair before essaying a shot. He had decided to aim for the grizzly's head, and hammer away at it until he brought the beast down. With one out of the running it would not be hard to down the other. Judging from the punishment the black bear had received he was already half dead. It had been a scrimmage regardless of fur and flesh.

Kent's first shot went home. The grizzly staggered but did not relax his hold on his enemy. Kent fired a second and a third time, aiming each time for the same spot. Five times in all the rifle spoke before a huge, yellowish-brown body relaxed and sagged away from the black bear's hold. The latter continued to snarl horribly, nevertheless ex-

hibiting a curious uneasiness at this new turn in matters. With the great sagacity of a bear he understood vaguely that something besides his teeth and claws had been instrumental in putting the grizzly *hors de combat.*

He allowed the grizzly's body to roll free of him. Slowly he rose on his hind feet, blood streaming from a wide, jagged tear in his throat. He threw up his huge black forepaws in a kind of despairing gesture, pitifully human. It was then that Kent seized his opportunity. He had reloaded in a twinkling after shooting the grizzly. He now let the badly-wounded survivor have the contents of the gun. With the last shot the black bear staggered a few paces and dropped.

Kent had often gloated over the possibility that he might shoot one bear during the trip. Yonder in the grassy little circle lay two huge forms, victims to his prowess. He was not half so much pleased, however, as he would have been to bring either of the beasts down on the run. It seemed like having taken rather an unfair advantage of them. It lacked sport.

"They wouldn't have left half as much of me as I left of them," Kent muttered by way of consoling himself. "I certainly put 'em

both out, even if I didn't distinguish myself as a hunter. I'll have to find my way back to George and Norton, *pronto*. They'll have to come here with me to-morrow for the skins. I want both of them. Guess I'll have one little look at my trophies, then hit the back trail."

Kent made his way to the vernal arena and approached the recumbent furry shapes with due caution. He wanted to be sure both bears were dead before going too close to them. Dead they were beyond all doubt. He would have liked to linger a little to examine his trophies, but dared not. He was already worried for fear he could not make the water hole that night. Once darkness fell he would be helpless to continue his hike.

Bravely he started to retrace his steps It was easy enough to return to the shallow canyon he had crossed just before coming to the scene of the fight. In the bed of the canyon Kent came upon the rattler again. To all appearances it had not moved since it rose to hiss at him. A bulge in its coils indicated it had dined recently and was lazy. This time Kent gave the reptile its quietus, glad of the chance to dispatch it. He hated snakes. He recalled Hal's advice to bury

the head. Then he trudged on again, whistling to keep up his spirits. He had begun to realize that he was very tired. He was tempted to stop for a few minutes' rest and regale himself with a sandwich from his knapsack. He pulled out the sandwich and devoured it hungrily, but continued on the march.

He had left the canyon behind and again found the bramble patch. His heart began to lighten. He had not lost his way, at least. He tackled the brambly route with renewed energy. Before many minutes he had decided that it was twice as hard going as when he had come through it earlier in the day. Then it had not seemed a very extensive patch. Now it stretched endlessly, in all directions. He strained his eyes for a sight of the copse of saplings he recalled passing through just before reaching the brambly stretch. He could not find it.

Even in the open there he noted uneasily that the sun had dropped amazingly low since he had started back. Before long the shadows would begin to gather. Kent stood still and scanned the sea of low-growing green which surrounded him. He had been so sure of his route when he climbed out of the canyon.

He had lost his course only since entering the bushes. How far he had wandered off his old track he could not say.

Determined not to spend the night among thorns, he selected a wooded grove, which looked not far distant, and headed for it. His eyes had deceived him. The grove was at least four times as far as he had calculated. He entered its cool green aisles at last, weary and disheartened. He could no longer fight back the sickening truth that he had, somehow, completely and hopelessly lost his way. Further, he had no one to blame for it but himself.

Meanwhile the guide and George had started tracing bear tracks in the opposite direction from Kent, wholly unaware that Kent had not followed them. It was probable they had picked up the black bear's tracks, which they found for some distance, the ground being soft and wet. Finally they lost the bear's trail. The sound of the one shot Kent had fired at the grizzly at the beginning of the chase, startled them both to the fact that Kent was not with them.

"What do you know about that?" George halted in amazement. "I supposed Kent was

right behind me. I don't see a sign of him. That must have been his gun. Unless—" His eyes turned themselves inquiringly on the woodsman.

"I guess it must have been Kent. He may have sighted a bear and brought the fellow down. We'd better get back to the water hole. I'd try to pick up our bear's trail again, but I don't care to go on without the boy. I can't see why he had to run off like that." Norton spoke in a slightly vexed tone. "He's the least at home out here."

"Oh, he won't go far. His head's level," George said confidently. "He must have fired all right enough. We're only a little way from the water hole. When we get there, you'd better whistle for him. He'll come running."

Reassured, Norton turned and swung steadily back to the water hole. Putting his fingers to his lips, he whistled long and repeatedly. No answering shots told him that Kent had heard. George hallooed lustily in a stentorian voice that Norton grimly remarked was almost as good as his whistle. Still no reply came out of the living green of the forest.

"A nice state of things," the Nevada hermit's speech held a worried note. "Our best

plan is to stay right here for awhile. He may come back before long. We could do a little scouting around to see if it was another sniper who fired the shot. Don't know as it's worth while, though."

"What do you suppose has become of him?" George was now less confident of Kent's speedy return.

"He has probably sighted a bear and forgotten everything to go after it. He'll remember what I told him around five o'clock tonight, maybe, when he's got himself all tangled up with the great outdoors." The guide's prediction was testily sarcastic. It was also far truer than he knew.

"Hadn't we better start out and hunt him if he isn't here by, say, one o'clock?"

"Yes. Remember we have to be back by sunset at the place where we left Brent and Tony. If Kent's still missing when we hit the trail for there all we can do is go on, pick up the other two lads and come back here. I know the way after dark. First thing in the morning we'll have to make a thorough search for him."

Thereafter the time dragged interminably to both Norton and George. Kent's sudden disappearance had taken the pleasure out of

the day for them. Until one o'clock they made a careful canvass of the territory immediate to the water hole, hallooing, whistling and firing off their rifles now and again. But all to no purpose.

"We'll go up the ravine a piece," the guide decided when one o'clock had come and gone. "The bed of it is mostly dry. He may have followed it along. Watch for bear tracks as you go."

They found a few tracks, then these ended abruptly. Finally they climbed out of the ravine, at least two miles above where Kent had left it, and entered a thick forest growth of pine, spruce, oak and cottonwood. Underfoot the going was hard, due to rocks and piled up underbrush. The guide kept a woodsman's unerring lookout for snapped twigs, broken limbs of low-growing trees, or any other sign that would indicate the recent passing of a man. At three o'clock, after a fruitless hunt, he reluctantly set his face toward the rendezvous.

"We'll have to cover the ground fast to make it by sundown," he grimly informed George. "Well, it's back here for us to-night and to-morrow keep up the hunt. Hope the boy will find his way to the water hole and

stay there until morning. That's about the best thing can happen."

George gloomily agreed that it was. Almost in silence the two began the hike to meet Hal and Tony.

"I'd sooner have expected any one of you boys to stray off rather than Kent," was one of the few remarks Norton indulged in during the hike.

"Positively reliable on all occasions! Warranted to be on the dot! Guaranteed to appear regularly on schedule time!" modestly declaimed Hal at a shout. Just at sundown the guide and George approached the rendezvous. Hal and Tony sat under a big tree awaiting their return. "That's us! We're the Long Trail Boys, O. K. We've been over half the state of Nevada, or so it seems, and you can't lose us."

"Wish I could say the same—" began the guide.

"Hey?" Hal interrupted him with a loud cry. "Where's old Kent, my buddy? What's become of him?" His tones changed from jovial to anxious.

"You tell," returned Norton briefly. "We found bear tracks and he got away from us somehow. We waited as long as we could for

him. We beat up the ground around the water hole where we saw the bear tracks. Not a sign of him."

"Gee whillikens! That's *fierce!*" Both Hal and Tony exhibited lively consternation. "We must find him. How about going back to that water hole, Mr. Norton? I mean right now. How long will it take us to get there? Can we make it before dark?" Hal hurled his questions, one after another, at the guide. His natural fund of energy bade him be up and doing.

"My idea exactly," approved Norton. "We go back there to-night. It doesn't matter about the dark. I know my way in the woods on the darkest night. We won't chance a search to-night for fear Kent might find his way there while we were out hunting him. The minute it's light we'll start out."

"I see where Craig will have a long wait for us," declared Hal. "If we find Kent by noon to-morrow we'll hit camp to-morrow night after dark. But if we don't—Oh, wow, I'm not going to think of it."

It was still light when the party set out for the ravine where Kent had last been seen. The early dusk of the forest dropped down on them like a pall before they reached their

destination. The boys heartily admired the strong, sure efficiency of the guide as he forged steadily ahead, never for an instant confused or uncertain as to his way. They stuck close to his heels, striving to pick up any points that would help them in night traveling. Tony was quite proficient in this already. Hal and George, however, were novices.

The singing of the little cascade as it flowed over the rocks informed two of the party that their journey was done. Four flashlights were eagerly leveled upon the water hole and its vicinity. They revealed no trace of the missing Kent. For the present, at least, the Nevada wild held him prisoner and refused to give him up.

CHAPTER XIII

A Strange Adventure

KENT spent the night in the grove, and, despite his uncomfortable predicament, slept soundly. Too utterly wearied to collect boughs for a bed, he spread his poncho, which he carried strapped to his back, on the dry ground and was lucky in having that. Before going to sleep he munched his last sandwich, took a long drink from his water bottle and was thankful for even these few comforts.

He awoke with the morning sun pointing golden fingers at him through the tall pines. The air was fragrant with the spicy odor of pine and balsam. Somewhere close at hand he could hear the trickle of running water. He sprang to his feet, bewildered for the moment. Where was he? Ah, now he remembered! His heart sank. The brightness of the morning dimmed for him as he remembered his predicament. Sturdily he braced himself with the thought that it would not long continue. He could not be so far away

from his companions that they would neither find him nor he them. He knew that, once they had become certain he was lost, they would not move far from the vicinity of the water hole without him.

His first act was to locate the water he could hear murmuring in his immediate vicinity. He found a mountain spring, a mere trickle of water, filtering down between rocks to a tiny natural basin below. It was ice cold and clear as crystal. Kent got out his folding drinking cup and drank long and deeply. Next he knelt on the edge of the basin and laved his hands and face, drying them on his handkerchief. Revivified, he sprang up and loped back to where he had left his knapsack and poncho.

In the knapsack were bacon, a box of salted crackers, one of waxy ginger snaps and several cakes of sweet chocolate. He had plenty of safety matches, so was sure of a fire over which to toast his bacon on sharp sticks. On starting from camp the hunters had divided the food necessities among them for carrying. Hence he had half the bacon and Tony the other half. Hal had the coffee and several cans of vegetables, while George and the guide divided the rest of the supplies between them.

Each had a box or so of crackers and a small supply of chocolate. This last they had found satisfying as well as nutritious.

Kent built a small fire with the dexterity of a seasoned woodsman. He sharpened the ends of two sticks with his hunting knife, and, seating himself cross-legged before the fire, toasted the bacon. Augmented by the crackers and ginger snaps he made a fair breakfast, though a somewhat salty one. It necessitated another trip to the spring, where he again treated himself to the sparkling water.

After breakfast his spirits rose tremendously. He rolled up his poncho, returned the remainder of his supplies to his knapsack and took the trail again. He tried earnestly to figure out his position from the sun. In the end he was not at all sure he was right. Considerably below him he could see a wealth of bright green which he took to be the bramble stretch he had wandered through on the day before. It did not seem to him that he had climbed high enough on the previous afternoon to be so far above it as he now stood. He decided he must be very close to the top of the mountain. Still, the other distant peaks he now glimpsed looked entirely different from those he had viewed

from the mountain ledge where they had camped.

The longer Kent studied the situation, the more hopelessly puzzled he grew. Given he was near the top of the mountain it might be easier for him to find the main camp than the water hole. In that case he wondered how long his comrades might be away from camp searching for him. Then there were his two bears. Would he be able to find them again while the meat was still eatable?

Kent determined fiercely within himself that he *must* make his way to his friends at once. He decided to descend to the stretch of waving green below him and try to retrace his course from that. After an hour of steady hiking he reached it, only to find himself deceived. The waving green was a stunted growth of saplings. They stood very close together, the underbrush so dense Kent viewed the prospect of forging through it with a gloomy face. He was sure he had seen no such part of the mountain before. He beheld no signs of the brambles. Odious yesterday, they would be a welcome sight to him now.

He slowly skirted the edge of the growth for a few yards, but found no trace of an opening in the tangle.

"I'd better keep out of them," he said aloud with a dubious shake of the head. "Guess I'll go back the way I came. I may hit a trail that will lead me somewhere I want to go."

Turning, he retraced his steps and climbed the gradual elevation for a short distance. All the time he carried the curious impression that he was not on the same mountain he had traveled yesterday. Yet this could not be. He was only imagining it. Half way back to his morning's starting point, he discovered something he had missed on the way down. It was a trail or rather the shade of a trail. It appeared to begin at the point where the course he was taking up the mountain crossed it at right angles. It was dimly defined, yet Kent was sure that it had been used by human beings at some time or other. Of course it might run but a few rods, perhaps merely yards, then end abruptly.

A second's indecision and Kent was following it. It was rough, rocky hiking, but it was undoubtedly a trail. Kent soon saw this to his own satisfaction. He began to conjure hopeful visions of himself walking into camp after following it, perhaps, the greater part of the day. This time he prudently

blazed as he journeyed. If it should end at last in a blind alley he could find his way back to the point from where he had taken it.

On and on he went without losing it. Occasionally it was obliterated for a short distance. By careful search he always picked it up again. He grew quite elated at his own success.

By two o'clock in the afternoon Kent believed he was nearing camp. The character of the territory seemed similar to the route over which they had ridden the ponies up the mountain. It showed frequent arroyos and ravines with jagged clefted rocks overhanging their ragged sides. One narrow steep ravine he crossed on a fallen tree that completely bridged it. He found his trail again on the other side. He descended into two different arroyos, followed the dry bed of them for a way and the same old trail led him up out of them. The farther he went the easier he found it to follow the path, just wide enough for a man to put one foot before the other.

Toward four o'clock Kent felt discouragement again begin to struggle up within him. He was seized with the sickening conviction that camp was farther away than ever. For several minutes he had heard a sound which

he knew to be that of falling water. It was evidently a fall of some size or he could not have heard it so plainly from afar off. It was growing louder with every weary, fruitless step he took. He had heard no such rush of water as that when they had ridden up the mountain.

From the low, dull murmur he had heard at a distance the noise had increased to a positive roar. Fagged though he was, Kent charged up a rough alder-grown slope in a hurry. For a moment he forgot the trail in the interest of this new development.

Suddenly he stopped and cried out in wonder. He had halted on the edge of a real canyon. It was a short one, but broad and deep with curved shelving walls. At the back of it a wide, magnificent flow of water poured down from a break in the piled up cliffs. It had the appearance of an immense spread white sheet. Beside it, from a smaller rent in the rocks, another fall, not more than three or four feet wide, cascaded down into the rippling stream of water which flowed through the canyon.

Filled with admiring awe at the primitive beauty of the scene, Kent soberly realized that the end of the trail had been reached for him. To gain the other side of the canyon called for

a physical effort he had no desire to put forth. It would be a long, arduous undertaking to descend the wall above which he stood, wade the stream and laboriously climb up to the other side. And to what purpose? Only to separate himself further from his friends.

Kent stared at the white gush of roaring water in utter fascination. The thunder of its fall drowned other immediate sounds. Standing close to the edge of the canyon wall, he suddenly felt something drop over his head and shoulders. He made a quick desperate movement that would have pitched him headlong into the bottom of the canyon had he not been held fast by a rope. It had pinioned his arms to his sides and had already been drawn tight enough to cause him great discomfort, barely short of pain.

"H-a-a-a!" Kent raised his voice in a frenzied shout of protest. Immediately the rope was drawn taut, he was surrounded by half a dozen silent men—Indians, all of them. Not a muscle of their stolid, copperlike faces moved as they closed in on him.

"How?" he exclaimed, recalling Hal's method of saluting Shy Beaver. "What do you want with me? I'm not your enemy."

"How?" The tallest of the group, a fierce-

looking brave, spoke. "Good. No hurt. You see." With that he deftly wound the rest of the lasso about Kent, picked him up as though he were a trussed fowl, and started along the edge of the canyon, striding away from the waterfall.

Kent did not raise his voice again. He was too utterly shaken and amazed for speech. He felt no terror at being thus carried off. He simply could not believe himself to be the central figure in this kidnapping of the wild.

Proceeding along the canyon's edge for a matter of yards, the Indians made preparations to descend. Able to note his surroundings, Kent saw that the point of descent was less steep than was the wall near the cascade. Also that there were rude niches in the stony formation which looked like narrow steps. Three of the party made the descent with marvelous ease and quickness. The tall Indian unwound the rope from Kent like a flash.

"You go this way," he informed Kent. "Rope strong. Me hold. No hurt." Before he could fully grasp this new development in his capture, he felt himself being swung free of the wall and lowered to the bottom of the canyon where the three waiting Indians

received him and quickly wound him up again. More, they tied a folded strip of black cloth securely over his eyes.

Though the stream formed by the emptying of the waterfall was broad, it was not deep. The Indians splashed into it, wading up it until fairly near the falls. They kept far enough away from the larger falls to prevent being drawn in by the suction of the foaming water below it. Their object, however, was the small cascade. Straight to it they went. Kent felt a cold deluge of water spatter him about the head and shoulders, then it suddenly ceased. He could only guess that his captors were wading the stream very close to the falls.

Breathless with the strangeness of his unlooked-for experience, he presently saw light again, the soft light of waning afternoon over the most picturesque valley he had ever beheld. Where he was he had not the slightest inkling. After feeling the splashing of water over him he had been carried for considerable distance, he judged. The blinder removed, he still blinked from the tight bandaging of his eyes. His captors stood grouped a little way from him, talking among themselves.

"They're not worrying themselves about me," was his grim conclusion. "They know

they've got me hard and fast." He rubbed his arms, still aching from the rope's pressure, and gazed hopelessly about him.

The valley in which he now stood reminded him of a huge emerald. It was set deeply in the yellowish canyon walls which gave forth a golden effect under the molten glory of the sunset. It was at least a quarter of a mile wide, carpeted with high, fine grass and thickly grown with trees. The silvery leaves of aspens mingled with the darker green of oak, alder, spruce and willow. A variety of birds fluttered about among the trees, calling to one another, bird-fashion.

Not far from where he stood Kent saw a rude log shack, half hidden among trees. He noticed that the Indians' glances strayed often to it. They appeared to be waiting for someone. None of them paid the slightest attention to him. He knew, nevertheless, that no movement on his part would escape them.

A guttural interjection from the tall Indian, whose piercing eyes had not once left the shack, was a signal that something was due to happen. Kent saw a figure emerging from the hut. It was that of a very old Indian swathed in the folds of a gayly-striped *serape*.

The *serape* was drawn up half over the wearer's head. From out of the brilliant-hued covering looked forth a long, yellow-white face with curiously glittering black eyes.

Kent gasped audibly as the ancient Indian advanced toward him. He recognized the face as the one he had seen peering at him through the screen of bushes. For an Indian the newcomer on the scene looked utterly unlike those of the group who awaited his approach with every apparent mark of veneration. Kent decided he must be a great chief of an entirely different tribe.

The weird old man passed the respectful group without so much as a glance. He made straight for Kent. Pausing directly in front of the lad, he stared into his face with fixed immobility.

"Who you?" he inquired with severity.

"My name is Kent Sherwood. I—"

"No-o!" the interruption came with a show of impatience, Spanish in character. Kent had heard Tony use that tone.

"Who you?" was the repetition. "Where come? Why come mountains? No good. I don't like. What want? No find nothin'. How then?"

"I'm with friends; four other boys and two

men. One of them is Norton, a great guide. Don't you know him?"

"No-o! Speak more," commanded the chief haughtily. He was not impressed with Norton's reputation as a guide. He did not wish to hear about him.

"We are on a trip, a pony-riding trip," Kent explained. "We come from Sweet Water and Mariposa Ranches, both west of here. We want nothing in the mountains but to hunt a little game and have a good time. We are going home in a few weeks."

"What good give stay here?" frowningly demanded the aged one. "You go *now*. Don't go; trouble. Many bad men in mountains. Indian fight these. You are bad, *quizas* [perhaps]? *No sabe* [I don't know]." He raised his blanketed shoulders in a slight shrug.

"We are not bad at all." Flushing, Kent rose to the defensive. "We only came here for a pleasure trip. You understand? I cannot go until my friends go. I do not know what they may wish to do. Just now I am lost from them."

"Lost?" The chief repeated the word. "Speak more. *No comprendo* [don't understand]."

"I'll bet he knows all about my being lost," speculated Kent. "He's a foxy proposition." Using the simplest words, he went on to relate briefly his predicament. He cannily made no allusion to having killed the two bears. He did not intend to turn them over to his captors if he could help it. There was a faint chance that the Indians had been on his trail only a short time before they captured him.

The chief heard him through in stolid, ominous silence. "Your camp; *sabe*. Far—not this mountain. One more." He inclined his covered head to the left.

"You mean our camp is on the next mountain?" Kent cried out eagerly. "Then I wish you'd put me on my way to it, Chief. Truly we are not here to do any harm or try to know any secret of the mountains that is none of our business. We are the *friends* of the Indians. Shy Beaver is our friend, and my chum knows White Shadow. We—"

"Wait." The chief cut Kent's impetuous speech short. The shade of a change touched his mummy-like features at mention of White Shadow. He called out harshly to the group of Indians. A short wide-shouldered fellow with a broad, good-humored face came instantly to him.

He stood stock still as the aged imperator addressed him rapidly in an Indian dialect. After a little he turned to Kent.

"You tell me what you tell him; same," he requested. "You speak fast. He don't understand all."

Kent complied. The broad-faced Indian interpreted. The chief received Kent's communication with expressionless features.

"You friend White Shadow? No—White Shadow no friend white men. White Shadow *hate*. I *hate*. Take all; give nothin'." The old chief spoke with bitterness.

"I did not say I was the friend of White Shadow," Kent corrected, mustering all his dignity. "I do not know him. I have never seen him. My friend, Brent, knows him. He is the friend of the Indians."

"Uh-h-h!" The articulation was freighted with sarcastic unbelief. "No white man Indian's friend."

"Sorry you think that." Kent could not resist a politely satirical tone. He regarded the old man with feigned indifference. He had heard and read that this was the best way to deal with an Indian.

"Sabez—" The chief turned from Kent to the interpreter and jabbered rapidly.

"You know this place—how you come here?" There was a trace of ironic humor in the question the interpreting Indian now put to Kent.

"You *know* I don't, and so does he," Kent replied with spirit. "You had no right to bring me here as you did. You had no right to lay hands on me. I am not your enemy, neither are my friends. I have no quarrel with any of you. If you will show me the way to the place where you lassoed me I will try to find my trail back to camp."

"*No-o!*" the ancient chief had understood Kent's energetic words. "You no go. Stay. White Shadow soon here. Him son my son. He say you friend—good. Show the way. He say—no good; mebbe stay here long while."

"*What?*" Kent's voice rose in consternation. He forgot his indifferent pose. The prospect of remaining a prisoner in a secret nook in the mountains while his friends were frantically searching for him was appalling, to say the least. Shy Beaver had declared that the mountains were run by the spirit of White Shadow's great-grandfather. It struck Kent that White Shadow's live grandfather had a great deal more to do with it than his ghostly ancestor.

CHAPTER XIV

The Escape

ABOUT the time that Kent was being carried, helpless, into the secret valley, Norton and Kent's three chums were resting briefly beside a little mountain spring, weary and disheartened. That day the quartette had covered twenty-two miles of the roughest kind of territory in steady search of the missing youth. They had whistled and hallooed and fired off their guns at intervals until they were all down to not more than two or three cartridges apiece. Their food supplies were also done.

"There's no use in talking, we'll have to get back to camp," was the guide's ultimatum. "Craig will be worried if we stay away over another night. We've nothing to eat and precious few cartridges left. We'll go back for him and young Whitney, then move our camp over in this direction. We'll beat up the trails in every direction from the new camp until we find him."

The firm set of Norton's mouth indicated

that he purposed to find the missing boy, no matter how greatly the odds might be against him.

"Can we make camp to-night?" Hal's voice was not quite steady. He could not bear to think of turning his back on the search for Kent even briefly.

"Yes; we are not so far from it. It's nearly five now. We'll reach it some time during the night. I'm going to rig up some torches. They'll be a first aid to swift travel after night. What have we left in the grub line?"

"A little coffee; nothing else," reported Tony mournfully.

"Well, that's better than nothing. A cup of black coffee all around will brace us up a good bit. We've the water handy. Might as well make it now and be on the march."

"I will make it, Señor Norton." Tony was already extracting from his knapsack a large collapsible cup which would hold fully three pints. He had brought it along on purpose to use in making coffee.

Hal and George busied themselves in gathering enough dead wood from the lower parts of small trees for a quick fire. This they soon had blazing and the making of the coffee was

promptly accomplished. It was drunk to the last drop and the discouraged searchers were prepared to take up with renewed energy the long hike into camp.

While the boys had labored with the coffee the guide had raked up enough resinous wood for good torches. He was ready with a bundle of them by the time the hike was again begun. By descending the mountain for a quarter of a mile they swung into a well-defined trail with which the guide was most familiar.

"I walked this same trail twenty-five years back," he told the boys. "It's an old Indian trail, and a good one."

So it proved. When they left it to take a short, steep one to the ledge, the boys shared the guide's opinion concerning it.

"Twenty minutes to two! We're not getting home much ahead of daylight," declared Hal as they struck the ledge. Their last torch had burned out half an hour before, so they wer nearing the cave in darkness.

"Who goes there?" challenged the familiar but incisively stern tones of the ranchman.

"Hey, don't hand us any hot shots. You know us," was Hal's quick return to the salutation.

"Oh! *All right!*" There was unmistakable

relief in the rejoinder. Next instant Hartwell Craig had advanced to meet them. "What on earth—" he began.

"Kent here?" interrupted Hal in a strained voice.

"*No.* Isn't he with you?" almost shouted the ranchman.

"He is not. Our last hope's crumpled," Hal groaned despairingly. "We thought he might have found his way back to camp."

"Kent *lost!*" Craig's voice contained incredulity. "He's the last one of you boys I'd think that would happen to. When did you last see him?" He continued with a series of alarmed questions.

All four of the returned hunters answered them in chorus or individually. The ranchman listened with a grave face. "What's to be done, Norton?" he asked tersely when fully in possession of the story of Kent's disappearance.

"Move camp at daylight to the water hole. He's somewhere beyond that point still. If he had been able to find the water hole again he could have made camp, I think. He and the boys blazed our trail to it just for practice. He could have followed his own blazing."

"I believe it," agreed Craig with conviction.

"Well, it lacks little of dawn. The minute light shows we'll be on the move. How about something to eat? Are you hungry? You can't have much left in the way of supplies."

"Are we hungry? Uh-h-h!" Hal pretended to collapse as he rubbed his empty stomach. "All we had for supper last night was a cup of black coffee apiece."

"Then we might as well get breakfast at once and have it out of the way."

"Here you are." David came out of the cave, flashlight in one hand, a side of bacon and a bag of flour in the other. These last he laid down on the rocky floor of the ledge and returned to the cave. He reappeared with two cans of pineapple, a can of coffee, the other necessary biscuit ingredients and a small smooth board on which to mix and handle the dough.

"You're a life saver and no mistake!" Hal was forgetful of his resolve not to speak to David again. "I guess I'd better decorate you with my talisman."

"Oh, never mind." David gave an embarrassed laugh. Hal had somehow touched a responsive chord. The news of Kent's disappearance brought home to him the knowledge that he liked these lads far better than

he had believed himself capable of liking them. "I'm sorry about Sherwood," he added soberly. "He's a good fellow."

"Put her there!" Hal held out his hand. David hesitated the merest instant, then extended his own. Immediately he turned away and busied himself with laying a fire from a stack of selected wood just outside the cave. Both boys, however, felt the wall between them crumble away. It was the beginning of fellowship for them.

Regardless of possible lurkers, the ranchman and David built up a good-sized separate fire to see by. While the two cooked breakfast, Tony, Hal and George went to drive the ponies and burros nearer to the cave. The work of reloading would begin the minute they had eaten.

As they ate they discussed the dire calamity which had befallen Kent. Norton was sure of Kent's safe re-appearance. He declared that, while Kent lacked experience as a woodsman, he had the sturdy ability to take care of himself. "Such lads as he always win their way through anything. If they are cornered they know how to put up a fight that is a fight," was his opinion.

Just as the first sickly rays of a gray dawn

trembled in the east, the little procession started. It was Norton's intent to descend and strike the Indian trail by which he and the three boys had returned to camp. While the short descent to it would be hard on the ponies, the Indian trail would afterward furnish them with fairly easy going.

While the rescue party was nobly getting under way, Kent was lying on the rough floor of the "mummy's" shack, concocting one desperate plan of escape after another. After a scanty supper of jerked venison, tortillas and water he had been relegated to the shack, there to be under the watchful eye of the old chief. The aged imperator had shared the supper brought him by an Indian with the grudging invitation "Eat" as he dumped the food on the floor in front of the corner where Kent had finally seated himself after having stood about until he was tired out.

As nearly as he could judge he was not more than half a mile from the waterfall. He speculated that his captors must have passed within two or three feet of the smaller cascade and climbed the canyon wall beyond it. The canyon he was now in must lie convenient to the one containing the falls. If he could

escape from this one the roar of the water would serve as a guide to the other canyon. His idea was to reach the top of the imprisoning canyon, then mark a cross in the earth. He would consecutively follow three points of it for half a mile returning to the mark each time unless one of them led him to the falls. If none of these led him to the falls he would return to his starting point and cross the canyon. He would then repeat the maneuver on the other side.

Other schemes suggested themselves to his determinedly active brain, but he always returned to this plan. The problem which he could not solve was how to escape from the valley. Escape he would, and soon. He was resolved on that point. Tired out by the activity of his own mind, he dropped into slumber at last.

He awoke to find the chief prodding him with a moccasined foot and none too gently. On the floor beside him were three cold tortillas and a small stone jar of water. Seeing Kent's eyes open, the old man walked away without a word. He passed through the open doorway of the shack, leaving his captive to himself. He had slept on the opposite side of the room rolled up in a gorgeous blanket. Kent specu-

lated as to whether he would dare walk out of the shack. Quickly devouring his meager breakfast, he got to his feet and walked to the doorway. He gazed out at the green valley. It was even more beautiful in the gray, misty morning than when the sun had shown resplendently upon it. It would be an ideal spot for a camp, he thought. It did not surprise him to see no one about. He was certain of being watched.

Up and down the emerald valley he gazed, trying to guess from which end he had been carried in. The regular thud of horses' hoofs suddenly put him on the alert. The volume of sound indicated a number of riders. From out some hidden cove, in what he took to be the upper part of the valley, a company of Indians, superbly horsed, rode in among the trees and toward him. He exclaimed softly as he saw that each carried a rifle across his saddle bow. There were probably twenty of them and they were out for battle, that was evident. Kent rubbed his eyes as they came galloping down the valley, passed by the shack and swept on. Was he really in a West supposed to be devoid of warring Indians or had he suddenly been set back in stirring times of the past?

Among the war party he recognized his captors of the day before. His churlish host was not among them, nor was he anywhere in sight. Not one of the riders so much as glanced at the shack as they thundered by it. Emboldened by this lack of notice, Kent stepped out of it and eagerly watched the course of the riders. They were soon lost among close-standing ranks of trees. Kent experienced a little thrill of triumph. If, after a time, they did not return, he would know they made their way out of the valley. The first chance he could find he would follow them.

As he continued to stare toward the grove, he received an unceremonious poke in the ribs. His "mummy" captor had come up. Now he motioned imperiously toward the shack. Kent obeyed the autocrat with apparent docility. A daring idea, however, was forming in his mind. He would watch closely for a while and discover if possible if he and the old chief were the only ones left in the valley. If so, then that same chief was due to receive a surprise. The lax guard kept over the prisoner proved that the chief and his braves were confident he could not get clear of the valley by himself. He would fool

them. Where their horses could travel he certainly could go.

Kent never forgot that long morning. Hour after hour he patiently watched and waited for an opportunity to put the plan he had laid into action. The shack, a rude, one-room affair, was devoid of even most primitive kind of furniture. The chief had no possessions apparently, except a rifle, a couple of colorful blankets and a stone water jar.

After driving Kent inside the shack, the Indian entered also. For a time he sat cross-legged on the floor and smoked a long slender pipe. Later he rose and left the shack, closing the door after him. Kent heard him fussing with it from the outside. Walking over, he tried it. It had been securely fastened, as he suspected. The four square openings which served as windows were so high up in the wall Kent could not see out of them except by jumping up, catching hold of an unglazed frame and pulling himself up until his shoulders were on a level with the opening.

Frequently consulting his watch made the hours pass on leaden wings. At twelve o'clock he had heard nothing to indicate the return of the riders. It was nearly one when he heard a light fumbling at the door. Incidental

with the sound he made a swift lithe move across the room. On the floor lay both of the chief's gaudy blankets. The serape he had worn wrapped around him.

Like a flash Kent snatched up one of the blankets and stationed himself at one side of the doorway so that the opening door would conceal him from the chief on his entrance into the shack.

"Ugh!" the chief gave a disapproving grunt as his eyes failed to discover his prisoner. It was his only remark. The folds of one of his own blankets suddenly enveloped his head and shoulders. Kent could not tie the ends of the blanket, but he gave them a muscular twist which held them where he wanted them to stay for a minute or so. He tried not to be unnecessarily rough with the old man. All he wished was a minute's leeway. He left his captor staggering blindly about and made a dash through the doorway. Bang! went the door. Kent slipped a stout, cunningly-contrived bolt into place, leaving his recent captor a prisoner until some of his braves should arrive to release him. He could not help laughing a little as he raced down the valley in the direction the riders had taken. "I handed him a surprise and no mistake," he muttered.

Kent kept his eyes straight ahead as he ran until he had reached the place, as nearly as he could judge, where he had begun to lose sight of the riders. He then slackened his pace and began to study the towering walls of the canyon. Certainly there was no way up those uncompromising, rocky heights that horsemen could take. Perhaps they had gone by a secret passage-way. Norton had said the mountains were full of such reminders of the cliff dwellers.

He noticed after a little that the valley was broadening. Of a sudden a bitter cry of disappointment welled to his lips. Ahead of him the valley appeared to come to an abrupt end in a wall of rock, dotted here and there by stunted, misshapen trees. Where the floor of the valley and the frowning wall met were tangled thickets of scrub oak, alder and birch made more impenetrable by luxuriant relays of bushes. There was no sign of a point of exit.

Perhaps the horsemen had doubled among the trees, ridden back and out of the upper end of the valley purposely to deceive him. Kent could not fathom why they should go to so much trouble on his account. He decided to tackle the thickets and discover if

possible whether they concealed a hidden entrance to a passage. His rifle, cartridges, knapsack, hunting knife, flashlight and poncho had been stripped from him before the bandage had been removed from his eyes on his arrival at the secret valley. He would have nothing to burden him, he sourly reflected.

He plunged into the bushes most uneasy in mind. If he could find no way of egress, he would later be at the mercy of the Indians. There was no hope of hiding long from them in the valley. They would be furious with him for the indignity he had put upon their chief.

He had hardly set foot in the thicket when he became aware of a sound, distinct above the call of birds and the hum of busy insects. It was a faint clop-clop, similar to that of a horse's hoofs striking on a stone pavement. It grew louder and louder, then stopped. Next he heard the cracking and swishing of invaded twigs and bushes. He crouched low. For a second or two he saw nothing. Then out of the wilderness at his right emerged an Indian on a horse.

Kent drew a sharp, admiring breath. He was gazing at the most magnificent spectacle of man and horse he had ever beheld. Sitting

haughtily erect on a black horse, which even Whirlwind could not outclass, the rider possessed the soft, pale grace and beauty of the idealized Indian. His features were regular, save for a slight prominence of his cheek bones, his eyes large, black and somber. His long, black hair hung heavily over his shoulders. One lock was fastened across the top of his head by a queer red, white and green feathered ornament. It was similar to the one Shy Beaver had given Hal, save that the feathers were at least a foot in length.

The Indian wore buckskins, the trousers fringed, and severely plain moccasins. Across his saddle-bow was a rifle. A long hunting knife, sheathed, hung from his belt. Kent instantly saw that rider and horse were plentifully bespattered with water. His heart began a wild thumping. That was the condition in which he had entered the valley. There was a secret passage and this high and haughty chieftain had ridden through it.

Kent lay still, hardly daring to breathe, until the Indian was well up the valley. With desperate energy he tore his way to the point where he had first spied the horseman. The bushes had slipped back into place, hardly betraying that one had just passed through them.

Kent uttered an inarticulate gurgle of satisfaction as he charged upon a screen of bushes which hugged the rocky wall. He swept them aside with impatient arms. The force of the movement threw him forward. He pitched headlong into a black aperture which the bushes had concealed. Unhurt, he picked himself up to find that he had fallen two or three feet and into a passage. Cautiously he walked forward and stood upright. His head did not touch the roof. Neither did his arms, raised high above his head. The floor of the passage was comparatively level.

Without hesitation he started valiantly ahead in the dark. He was confident the passage was neither long nor perilous. He had not advanced far when he heard a welcome sound. It was the steady beat of water over rocks. Kent ran toward that welcome sound. He paused directly behind the large fall. Up and down the dark space his eyes traveled searching for a ray of light that would indicate an egress at one side of the fall. He could make out nothing.

Despair briefly seized him. He rallied and began a slow walk up and down behind the fall. At the extreme left end he discovered something. He was facing the small cascade.

Through it he could see light faintly. Of a sudden he understood. The Indians had passed straight through the cascade instead of going around it.

"That's the way they do it, is it? Well, it's up to me to do the same." Kent drew back a few steps and gathered himself for a quick dash. He did not propose to be knocked down by the force of the water if he could prevent it. Came an instant when he felt as though his breath must leave his body. He shut his eyes tightly and gasped. He opened them, sputtering, to find himself standing knee-deep in ripples and directly in front of the smaller cascade.

CHAPTER XV

The Blow Falls

"IT'S not only a terrible crimp in our expedition to lose old Kent; it's a downright tragedy." Hal Brent gloomily threw fresh wood on the camp fire and flung himself down in a disconsolate heap before it. "If I had thought for one little minute that one of us would have gone and got ourselves lost, I'd certainly not have proposed that we separate while we were out hunting. It's my fault, as usual."

"Oh, come now, Brent, don't feel that way about it," said the ranchman soothingly. "I'm not doubting that Kent will find his way to us somehow. He's strong and very determined. He'll certainly not lie down and starve to death in the woods while he waits for us to come and find him."

"Kent'll do his best to find us, just as we'll do our best to find him, but you've got to remember that we may miss connections entirely," Hal returned, refusing to be consoled by the ranchman's well-meant effort to cheer

him. He was, naturally, taking Kent's disappearance hardest of them all.

"We'll not stir from these mountains until that boy is found," the guide said forcefully. "Keep up your nerve, Brent. We'll hit the trail again the minute day breaks, and we'll keep at it every day until we find Kent. Just now the thing to do is turn in. It's after eleven and we need sleep to give us strength for a hard day's hike to-morrow."

"I'm not going to turn in now," Hal said obstinately. "I don't feel sleepy. I'm going to sit by the camp fire for an hour yet. I'll keep it going for a while. If Kent should happen to see it from quite a way off it might lead him to camp."

"See that it's not more than an hour, then, Hal," advised Mr. Craig. "You've been sitting out late every night since we made camp here and you need your rest."

"I'll turn in before one," Hal promised, his usually merry features utterly downcast. For several nights he had sat up late to keep the fire alive as a beacon to light Kent home, should the lost boy manage to find his way through the night to anywhere near the camp. The others had offered to spell him at this self-imposed labor of friendship, but he would not hear to it.

Under the stress of this latest "crimp" in the little expedition, the fact that they had been shot at by a lurker in the bushes had not troubled the party. They had thrown off the caution which had marked their movements for several nights after the shot had grazed David's ear. Their camp fire had been built high and ruddy since Kent's disappearance as soon as darkness descended. The days they spent beating up the trails in every direction from their headquarters, the water hole.

The others having turned in for the night, Hal stretched himself before the cheerful blaze, his eyes on the black mass of forest which loomed up around him. It was unusually still, he thought. No sound other than the faint gurgle of the near-by spring fell upon the hush of night.

It was after one when he despondently decided to beat out the fire and turn in. Out of the still blackness of the woods no Kent had wandered in, guided to camp by the firelight. Every night Hal had cherished a forlorn hope that this miracle would take place.

He stood for a moment wistfully gazing into the dark and wondering if "old Kent" were really well and unharmed. He was about to begin beating out the fire when his

alert ears picked up a sound that made his heart beat faster. It was the unmistakable crunch of a foot upon a dry twig. He peered sharply into the night in the direction whence it had come. Did his eyes deceive him or was he staring at the shadowy outlines of a man? His hand sought the pocket which contained his flashlight. Next instant he had trained it upon what he took to be a human form.

"How?" Hal gave a loud joyous yell which might have been heard a mile away. He swooped down upon the nocturnal camp visitor. He also appeared to be possessed of good lung power.

"Hi, you seven sleepers, wake up!" Hal bawled. "It's *Kent!* Do you all hear me? Kent—and he found his way back! Good work!"

"Hear you?" howled George Davis, coming on the run. "A deaf man could have heard you without even trying. Kent, did you say? Oh, let me at him!"

By this time every member of the party was thoroughly awake and quick to rejoice over the returned wanderer. Weary, dishevelled, briar-torn and hungry, Kent was treated to a reception in keeping with the anxiety

his continued absence had caused them all. Hal fairly hugged his chum in his joy and relief. "It's too good to be true!" he shouted over and over again.

"Where have you been and what happened to you?" was the guide's first question after Kent had been escorted to the camp fire. There he threw himself wearily down while Hal and Tony rushed to the supplies for coffee, biscuits and bacon with which to regale the hungry boy.

"Where haven't I been?" Kent said. "Over the whole state of Nevada; so it seems to me. Wait until I've had something to eat and I'll tell you my adventures. I am about all in. I couldn't have walked another quarter of a mile to save me. I just stumbled on the camp. Hadn't any idea I was so near it until I saw firelight through the trees."

"I see you are about done up," nodded the guide. "You'll feel life coming back to you after you've had something to eat. How long since you've eaten?"

"Two days." Kent lay back on the blankets that had been spread for him and closed his eyes.

The prompt arrival of George with a huge corned beef sandwich did much to boost

Kent's lowered vitality. He fairly "wolfed" it and sat up with a long satisfied "Ah-h-h! Maybe that didn't hit the spot."

Hal and Tony soon had a real meal ready for Kent and he ate ravenously everything they had prepared for him.

"I feel fine," he said as the last morsel disappeared down his throat. "Now I'll tell you where I was and what happened to me."

"You'd best let that wait until you've had some sleep," said the ranchman. "You need rest. Besides, it's not long till daylight."

This advice raised a chorus of protest from the boys who were anxiously waiting to hear what had happened to Kent.

"Oh, let him tell us," begged Hal. "He's dying to, and we can all sleep late. Now that the lost guy has come back, we don't have to pike out with daybreak to hunt him."

"I'm all right now," Kent sturdily said. "I want to talk, and I want to hear all about what you fellows did while I was gone. I knew you'd hunt for me."

"Hunt for you! You'd better believe we hunted for you! And to think that a steady old clock like you should forget his friends and go chasing off after a bear! It wouldn't have been strange if I had done that stunt.

But you—you certainly got yourself well lost while you were about it and tumbled right into big adventures." This was Hal's view of Kent's mishap.

"I know I caused you all a lot of worry and trouble," Kent declared contritely. "I had no business to let that bear lead me off. Still, I wouldn't have missed seeing that scrap between those two bears for a good deal. Wish the rest of you had seen it."

"Wish we had," was the chorus. The fact that Kent had shot the two bears was a matter for continued noisy acclamation on the part of the lively lads. Even quiet David helped to swell the tumult. Seated next to Hal by the campfire, David was wearing Hal's treasured talisman. Hal had laughingly made good his promise to decorate his recent aversion.

"Who would have thought that you'd walk off with all the adventures, you old tramp!" exclaimed George. "Shot two bears, lost yourself, got lassoed and swung over a precipice by Indians, kept prisoner, escaped, finally ducked under a cascade and found your way to camp. Some boy, you are!"

"Well, it might have happened to any of you," asserted Kent. "I just fell into the

whole scrape. I felt pretty blue by spells, I can tell you. I hope no one has lugged off my bears. I guess the meat won't be good, but I'd like the pelts. I want one of them for your folks, Hal."

"I know that place where they fought it out," assured the guide. "We'll go there in the morning. They should have been bled, skinned and quartered at once. Hope the coyotes haven't got 'em."

"I didn't hear one all the time I was around there," returned Kent.

"Maybe they've missed that belt. Don't think we want the carcasses, but I'll get you the skins. We may be lucky enough to bag a bear before we're through."

"We didn't shoot anything worth while that day," Hal told Kent. "A few birds, and Tony took a shot at a deer, but it gave us the slip. It was not more than half grown."

Despite Kent's first great exhaustion he refused to turn in that night until he had spent some time with his companions and heard the account of their search for him.

"You saw White Shadow," was Hal's positive assertion when Kent described the Indian he had watched emerging from the secret passage. "He is a work of art, that

red man. Too bad he wasn't there when they took you to the valley. He wouldn't have held you. He'd have brought you to us. Old Methuselah, his grandfather, must be a spiteful proposition."

"I'd like to know who they're fighting," commented the guide. "Whites and Indians both, maybe. According to the chief, they are sore at the whites."

"They weren't rough with me," Kent said. "I don't know why they wanted to snake me off to their secret valley."

"Hard to say what's stirring here just now," mused Norton. "The old chief said you were on the next mountain. You weren't. You were mighty near it, though. That valley's between the two. Strange I never came across it. I know that waterfall. It's almost between two mountains."

"Did you hear any shooting to-day?" Kent asked.

"Nope. They're fighting their battles far away from here, I guess. We'll plod along with our hike unless it gets too hot for us. We've as much right here as they."

At daybreak the next morning Norton, George, Hal and Tony left camp to visit the scene of the bear conflict and bring back the

skins. Kent was still tired enough to remain in camp. Craig and David bore him company. They busied themselves in the construction of a good-sized lean-to which they had begun the day before. Kent, stretched luxuriously on blankets, watched them in indolent comfort.

Toward eleven o'clock he was awakened from a cat nap by a loud disapproving whinny from Silverheels, who, with the other ponies, was tied among the neighboring trees. Kent raised himself on his elbow to see three strange men approaching on wiry little ponies. They were still far enough away so that he could not get a good view of their faces.

Straight up to him they rode and reined in almost on him. Roughly-dressed and unkempt, two of them were white men. The third—Kent had never looked upon a more evil countenance. Swarthy, low-browed, with small, snaky black eyes, a beak-like nose and a wide slash for a mouth, sheer ferocity stood out from the unprepossessing face. Not very tall, he sat humped over on his pony, leering unpleasantly at Kent.

"What's your name?" snapped the foremost of the trio, a tall, lank man with weak blue eyes and a loose-lipped mouth.

"What is your business?" countered Kent. "Have you got a man named Craig with your outfit?"

Hartwell Craig and David had both seen the approach of the trio. David had stared, then turned very white. With a muttered sentence or two to the ranchman he had promptly disappeared. At mention of his name the latter now came forward.

"My name is Craig," he said shortly. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I want that boy you've been hiding," snarled the spokesman. "You think you've been pretty smart, don't you, Mister Craig? Well, your jig is up. I'm his uncle and his guardian. He ran away from my farm and he ain't of age. Right here's the sheriff of my county. Show this smarty your badge." He now addressed a short, fat man with bleary eyes and a short stubby mustache.

"Gotta hand over that kid," the latter decreed in a gruff voice, turning back the lapel of his coat to display his badge.

"I don't believe you are a sheriff and I shall not turn a fine boy like David Whitney over to a set of toughs like you. *You* aren't fit to be his guardian. I have taken steps to end your cruelty to him."

"I've got papers," blustered the other. "Right here, too." He tapped the breast of his soiled tweed coat. "Either turn over that boy or I'll make it hot for you. Guess you don't know who you're bucking against. This man here is Chief Metanzo. He can turn a bunch of Indians loose on you that will clean up you scrubs in a hurry. He *runs* these mountains. Don't you, Metanzo?"

The swarthy horror lifted his thin upper lip in what passed for a smile, but made no comment.

"We are not afraid of you or your Indians. Nevada still has laws, I believe, that take care of such creatures as you. I can't say much for your representative there. A sheriff ought to choose better company. You had best be on your way. You are not impressing me, in the least, and you *can't* have David Whitney. *That's flat.*"

The ranchman looked squarely from one to another with contemptuous defiance for their boasted power. The Indian's hand traveled toward his hip pocket. He evidently packed a gun. Undoubtedly the other two carried revolvers.

"Come on!" The aggressor flung himself

from his pony. "I'm going to nab the boy and tote him off. He's around here. I saw him as we came up. If that bluff draws a gun on you, fill him full of lead. You know his kind."

Kent, who had stood back a little during the interview, quietly ranged himself beside the ranchman. He had calmly secured Craig's rifle. Now he trained it on the repulsive Indian. The ranchman's revolver was at his belt. His right hand was in position to draw it, if necessary. While neither he nor Kent wished to do any shooting, they felt it their duty to protect themselves.

Finding himself covered, the Indian made no move to obey his companion's order. Neither did the sheriff. They continued to sit their ponies. The spokesman took a step or two forward. The ranchman's revolver came into instant play.

"My advice to you," Craig said in a tense, hard voice, "is to get out of here. Start shooting and see what happens to you. We can shoot as straight as you can. Don't forget that."

"You don't tell me!" the other essayed a sarcastic laugh. It died out rather weakly. "We're not out for a killing. We aim to

get what we came for—my nephew. Since you can't see it that way, we'll leave you for a little while to think it over. When we come back—" He paused, his eyes narrowed. "I guess you'll be ready to change your mind and hand him over."

Taking a long backward step, he leaped astride his pony, gave the animal a savage cut with his quirt and galloped off. His companions were only a second behind him. The three departed as quickly as they had appeared.

"Is *that* David's uncle?" was Kent's incredulous question.

"Yes. I wouldn't have known it if David hadn't seen him as he came up. I told him to stay back and let me do the fighting."

"Can he really take him from you?"

"I don't think it. You see what he is. He's not a proper guardian for the boy. He'll have to prove himself that beyond a doubt before I admit his claim on David. He lives on a run-down farm in western Colorado. He has worked David like a horse, besides being an utter brute to him. The poor lad ran away from him this summer and came to me. I have my lawyer on the case. David said his uncle would follow him. I was glad of this

trip on that very account. I didn't think he would trail David into the mountains. He seems at home with that filthy Indian. He looks to me to be a half-breed."

All in a flash Kent understood David. He knew now the reason for the latter's brusque behavior on the train and afterward.

"Gee whiz, but I'm sorry for Whitney!" he exclaimed. "No wonder he ran away. Let's go and tell him they've gone. Do you think they'll come back?"

"I don't know. Hope they won't set the Indians on us. He claimed Metanzo, that hideous half-breed, was a power among them. Anyway, they shan't have David."

"Don't you ever believe he is the boss of White Shadow or even any of those who captured me! They are miles above that thing. His gang may be the gang White Shadow is fighting."

"You may be right about that," the ranchman thoughtfully conceded. The two had walked down to the lean-to to look for David. "Wonder where he hid himself." The ranchman whistled long and sharply. He had learned the trick from the guide as well as had the Long Trail Boys.

A dead silence followed the whistle. The

ranchman called out, "Hey, boy!" and "Oh, David!" over and over again. Kent took up the cry and called lustily. Still no answer came.

"He's gone farther away than he needed to go," complained his benefactor, a worried expression in his kindly eyes. "He'll drift along presently, I guess."

An hour passed, then two, then three, but David failed to return. All afternoon Kent and Craig kept up an anxious watch. No David appeared. At dark that night the bear party returned, triumphantly lugging the two great pelts. They were met with the story of David's disappearance.

"He must have been afraid his uncle could take him by force of being his guardian," was Mr. Craig's gloomy opinion. "He's left camp in order to escape all chance of it."

"*This* is about the worst yet!" The Nevada hermit showed an agitation which surprised his companions. "Why didn't you tell me about him? But, of course, you couldn't know my interest in him."

"Not even the boys here knew he had run away from his uncle," the ranchman replied, looking slightly puzzled at the guide's excited manner.

"I'd like to see this fellow who claims to be his uncle. So far as I know, his father's only brother was—he was killed in a quarrel. I may as well tell you, when David ran away from one uncle, if this man *is* the brother who was reported as dead, he ran straight to another. *I* am David Whitney's uncle. His father married my only sister, Isabel."

CHAPTER XVI

The Nevada Hermit's Story

THE guide's revelation was followed by an astounded silence. The ranchman stared at Norton as though unable to credit this amazing statement.

"What next?" Hal relieved his feelings by his usual long whistle.

"Why didn't you tell him—and me?" questioned Craig.

"I was waiting for a purpose. I saw how gloomy he was, but I thought it was his natural disposition. His father was like that. I hated to tell him just now. You see there's a good deal of his father's story that's sad. It would have weighed on his mind. I wanted him to have a good time with the boys. I had no idea of this other trouble of his. No wonder he seemed down-hearted."

"I wish you would tell us all about David. It would be a relief to know his history. He knows very little of it himself. And to think he has run off from his surest protectors!" Craig showed a lively distress.

"I'll tell you the whole story after supper. Let's get that over. We are all half starved. Maybe by that time the lad will be around again."

"*Yes, sir!* For goodness' sake let's get our grub," echoed George Davis. "If that gang of roughnecks should come sneaking along we'd be able to fight 'em better on full stomachs."

"George wants to fight," teased Tony. "He is longing for the great battle."

"I'm not the only one."

Nor was he. Not one of the boys but privately welcomed the idea of a real fight in defense of their absent comrade.

After supper, gathered around a low-burning camp fire, Norton told them a strange story.

"My sister Isabel," he began, "married Alfred David Whitney away up in a little town in Vermont. Our parents were dead and she lived with an aunt. I went West when I finished college to take up ranching. My father left us each a little money. I made all I had over to her except enough to pay my traveling expenses out West. I came out here to rough it and make a fortune.

"Isabel married after I came out here. I

knew David Whitney, her husband, and his brother John, too. I never liked John. She died after she had been married three years and left a baby son. John's wife took the baby to bring up. Right after that John and Alfred left Vermont together and went to Alaska. Up there David made a gold strike and a rich one. John didn't amount to anything. He went to gambling and got a bad reputation even in that hard region.

"Imagine how I felt when one day I received a letter from David saying he and John had quarreled, that John had drawn a revolver on him and in trying to take it away from him he had killed the good-for-nothing. He said in the letter he was going to leave the country rather than stand trial, for he was innocent, but was afraid he might not be able to prove it. He had made up his mind to take little David from John's wife and bring him up.

"I was living near Humboldt at that time. One night I heard a knock at the door of my cabin. I opened it to David Whitney. He stayed at my cabin for a week. He was on his way east to get his son. Then he intended to take the boy and sail for Australia. It seems the quarrel had come off in a gambling den. John had stolen a bag of nuggets from his

shack. David traced him to the gambling den, intending to make him hand over the bag. John had a lot of his friends, all hard characters, to back him. John had pulled a gun on him and he had jumped the scoundrel. Next he knew, John was lying on the floor of the den with the blood running from his temple. The gang turned on David and he had to fight to escape. He knew they'd swear his life away if he stayed, so he vamoosed.

"What worried him most was his son," Norton continued. "He knew John's wife would try to hide little David from him for spite. He'd made up his mind to get his boy. When he left me, I never saw him again. I tried to get track of him, but couldn't. I tried to find the boy. John's wife had taken him and disappeared from Vermont. I never learned what became of David. He had a good deal of money and a partnership in a gold mine in Alaska. He'd made a will, for he told me so, leaving all he had to his son. I wrote to the lawyer in Nome who drew up the will, but never heard from him.

"The first news I ever had of David Whitney or his affairs after that was what the boy, David, told me that day at the shack

before all of you. I knew him for my nephew. He looks like my sister Isabel. His father was fair-haired and blue-eyed. That's why I changed my mind about taking your party out. I wanted to be near the boy and study him. I knew he was not happy, but didn't know why. I meant to tell him about himself and all, but I put it off purposely, as I told you. That's the whole story, except that he must be found, *pronto*, and this man who claims to be his uncle put where he belongs. In any case he's no good. He's probably under the ban of the law for a dozen offenses; maybe crimes."

"Perhaps this John Whitney didn't die of the gun shot," thoughtfully advanced Craig. "His brother didn't have a chance to discover positively that the rascal was dead. He made a mistake in running away. He should have stayed and seen it through. A really just man is never railroaded out of life. He could have proved his innocence."

"So I told him. I offered to go back to Nome and fight it out with him. He said it would not be wise. He would be framed the minute he went back." Norton sighed deeply. "He was a fine fellow, David's father. I never begrudged him Isabel. They were just ter-

ribly unfortunate. What I intend to do now is to take David and make him happy. He's had misery enough in his young life, judging from what you've told me."

The party lingered about the camp fire until after eleven, hopeful that David might return. Finally the guide declared they had better turn in and start out at daylight to hunt the missing youth.

"We ought to move camp," he said. "I know a higher and safer place than this, if those rapscallions should try any shooting games on us. There's no shelter here except to dodge behind trees. By the way," he turned to Kent, "did you know you shot a very celebrated bear?"

"Celebrated?" Kent repeated in puzzled tones.

"Yes. That grizzly has been known in these parts for the last ten years as the Wandering Bear. He has traveled Colorado, Montana, Idaho and Nevada. He was a fierce old fellow, and unusually cunning. He's laid more than one man low. I knew him in a minute by his markings. He'd a white patch, square in the middle of his throat, and another at the crown of his head. He'd one ear almost chewed off and a stiff fore-paw. There used

to be descriptions of him posted around this region. He was a killer!"

Kent and his chums received this information with amazement. Kent flushed scarlet under the teasing approbation of his companions.

"I wouldn't call myself a tenderfoot, hereafter, if I were you," Hal advised. "We might think you were only fishing for compliments."

"Oh, go on! You make me tired, all of you. I'm going to turn in. I hate to listen to such—"

"Crack!" Instantaneous with the spiteful crack of a rifle a bullet sped between Kent and Hal, scattering the dying brands at the edge of the fire. It was the signal for a fusillade of shots. Back among the trees at the left little flashes of fire tore the darkness, showing where the cowardly marauders had concealed themselves.

"Stamp out the fire," ordered Tony with admirable presence of mind. He began following his own order. Immediately the others helped him.

"Anyone hurt?" called Norton anxiously as sheltering darkness settled upon the attacked. "Thank goodness!" he added as no one answered in the affirmative.

Hal and Tony had sprung for their rifles, the firearms of the outfit having been stacked under a near-by tree. Kent's rifle having passed into the possession of the Indians, Hal handed him David's. By the aid of his flashlight, Tony standing directly behind him to block any betraying ray of light, Hal quickly distributed the small arsenal.

"Oh, please, Mr. Norton, can't we take a ping at 'em?" Hal entreated. "We've a right to. They started it."

"Wait a little," cautioned the guide, "if the sneaks send another—"

A second shower of bullets interrupted his words.

"Let 'em have one round," he growled between his teeth. "They want it. Soak it to 'em!"

Before the words were out of his mouth six rifles spoke in unison. Nor did the defenders stop until three rounds had been fired. As the echoes of their firing died out, a blank stillness settled down upon the shattered night.

"Hope that put a crimp in some elbows," was the guide's grim comment as the silence continued. "They thought we would scare like a bunch of rabbits. Get us all upset, it would be easy to jump the camp, steal the

ponies and burros and leave us dead or alive, just as it happened."

"Were they Indians, do you suppose?" George asked, just above a whisper. The party were stationed in a close group behind an immense-trunked oak.

"No. I'll wager they were that gang that ruffian who was after David threatened to set on us," the guide said sternly. "I can well believe the fellow may be John Whitney. The description Craig gave fits him. So does this night's work. He'll answer to the law for this."

"But we can't prove who it was fired on us," reminded Craig. "The threat followed by an attack is strongly circumstantial, of course, against this scamp. We are far away from courts and civil justice, though," he added with a smile.

"Let me get my hands on this fellow, if he turns out to be John Whitney, I'll see he's brought to justice, if I have to rope him and drag him all the way back to Carson City. I've a long score to settle with him. I wish David had stuck to camp." Norton's intonation changed from vengeful to worried. "If he's not here by daylight, I think it will be best to move camp, anyway. This is the worst kind of place to be under attack."

"Quiet little outing we've had!" said Hal. "Old S. B. knew a few things about this peaceful region, I'll say. We've been handed about everything but the ghosts that White Shadow is supposed to be busy with."

"Ghosts!" snorted the guide. "I'd rather—"

His voice died out in a kind of gasp. The hush of the night was again broken. This time by the most blood-chilling wail that any of the group had ever heard. It had begun with a long moaning sound, increasing in horrid volume and reaching a shrill terrible screech which never could have proceeded from a human throat. Over and over again it came, more hideous with each repetition. To the startled listeners it was borne for the moment upon them that Shy Beaver's solemn assertion regarding evil spirits was no myth. The ghosts were upon them!

CHAPTER XVII

A Mysterious Night Errand

FAR above the camp on a thickly-wooded knoll David Whitney awakened from a light slumber to the sound of that unearthly screeching. He sat up on the uneven ground, which had served him as a bed, in justifiable alarm. The wailing sounds were much closer to him than to his comrades below him. He was very sure that it was not the scream of a panther or mountain lion he had heard. He did not believe it to be the voice of one or more persons. He decided he had better move on away from it, then changed his mind. He was helpless to proceed with any surety in the dark.

Acting on a rash impulse, he had fled from camp at sight of the man he most dreaded. David had always been doubtful of Hartwell Craig's power to hold him against his uncle's claim, if it came to that. He had resolved never to return to his uncle. In consequence he had bolted from camp, unarmed and with nothing but his knapsack which he had hastily

snatched up. It was his intention to return to his comrades the next morning. He realized, rather sheepishly, that his flight had been ill-advised.

As nearly as he could judge he was not more than two miles from the camp. He had taken an opposite direction from that by which his uncle had come into camp. It led him up a mountain steep to the dense wood-crowned knoll he had chosen as a temporary hiding place. So precipitous had been the route there, he was certain his uncle would not attempt pursuit of him on horseback, should he decide to take that direction.

His objective reached, David had hunted about for water, found a mountain rill and drunk thirstily. He had rummaged in his knapsack and brought up a hard biscuit, an almost emptied box of small sugar cookies and two cakes of chocolate. These he had devoured for his supper. Afterward, he had sat watching the dusk envelop the forest. He had kept an alert lookout on all sides until dark, then he had lain down to sleep, confident of not being disturbed.

He did not awaken at sound of the shooting, though the stillness over all carried the reports of the guns even beyond where he lay sleeping.

What he did hear, however, were the ghostly wails that had so startled his friends in camp. He listened in fascinated dread which could not be set down as actual fright. When, after a time, they ceased he sat very still, wondering as to their origin.

What presently started his heart to a lively thumping was a very faint rustling of the undergrowth only a few feet from him. He held his breath, ears trained to catch the sound. Someone or something was moving closer to him. He tried to raise himself to his feet without noise. In the attempt one of his feet struck against a bit of rock. It rattled down the incline with what seemed to him a tremendous racket. Incidental with it came distinct footfalls. A bright light glared upon him.

David stared in petrified silence. The hand that held the flashlight was that of an Indian. More, David knew the identity of the Indian. He was sure that he was face to face with White Shadow.

The flashlight trained steadily upon him, the Indian examined his find with the utmost deliberation. Unable to endure longer that slow, fixed scrutiny, David found brusque speech. He had entirely lost his first feeling of apprehension.

"I know you," he said. "You are White Shadow." A gleam of admiration appeared in his eyes as he gazed at the tall, stately figure before him.

"Yes. This—where you get?" White Shadow reached forth and touched the talisman which Hal had clamped to David's coat.

"It isn't mine. It belongs to—a—a friend. Shy Beaver, you know him, gave it to my friend, Hal Brent."

"It is well. Why you here? Why not with friends?"

"A man I hate came to camp. I went away for a while. I am going back in the morning. Are you a friend to us?" David asked the question with abrupt directness.

"*Si.*" The Spanish monosyllable was spoken with quiet sincerity. "You will know this soon. This mine." He again touched the ornament. "I give Shy Beaver. He give Brent. Brent I know. It is the sign my braves know. They no hurt Brent—Brent's friends. Why *you* wear?" White Shadow exhibited a shade of curiosity.

"Oh, he only lent it to me." David went on to explain Hal's impulsive act. He was not sure White Shadow would understand Hal's good-natured whim.

The Indian listened with the utmost gravity. Silence fell upon them as David finished. It held for a minute or two. "You find the way your camp now?" the Indian asked.

"Not in the dark. I'll go back as soon as it is light."

"You wait. Then I go with you. I have work now. You go with me. You see then I am the friend Brent. His father my friend. I am the Yaqui, of Mejico. Yaqui true, *para siempre* [always]."

David leaped at the invitation. To go on a mysterious night errand with White Shadow was a piece of unbelievable good fortune. He noted that the Indian carried no rifle. Instead he was armed with a heavy revolver and his long hunting knife.

"Come. You follow. Pretty soon see many Indians. They no speak. You no speak. Friends. Good."

With this White Shadow turned and plunged down the slope without the aid of the flashlight. David obediently fell in behind him, wondering if he could keep up with the Indian without breaking his neck. He soon found traveling in the darkness less hard than he had imagined. It became a point of pride with him to acquit himself creditably, even in this minor particular.

On they went and yet on. Two hours of steady traveling over a rough trail and David heard the sharp little neigh of a pony. Came the hoot of an owl, so close to David it startled him. It was answered immediately by two other owls. David smiled to himself. The hooting had been done by White Shadow.

Suddenly two shadowy forms loomed up before them. White Shadow addressed them in his own language. One of them replied in a soft guttural. Both then merged into the shadows. Next David heard the light thud of hoofs on the ground. Two horses were led up to them. David all but collapsed with surprise as a most familiar whinny greeted his ears. One of the horses was White Shadow's own mount; the other Silverheels.

"That's Brent's pony, Silverheels!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"Sh-h!" cautioned White Shadow. "No speak now. You ride."

Straining his eyes in the darkness, David saw a company of horsemen gathering as quietly as apparitions. He believed it to be the same group Kent had seen ride out of the secret valley. He did not doubt they were armed.

David swung to Silverheels' back with a

feeling of joyful relief. "I don't know what you're doing here, old boy," he leaned over and whispered to the pony, "but I'm sure it's all right. Anyway, I believe you knew me."

Silverheels tossed his head and neighed softly. He seemed to understand he must not make a loud noise. Presently, single file, White Shadow at the head and David riding behind him, the procession started. David guessed the time to be three o'clock, at least. To be riding somewhere in the dark with a band of armed Indians, his destination unknown, appealed strongly to David's spirit of adventure. The night riders proceeded slowly and with almost no noise. It seemed to him that they had not journeyed very far when a halt was called. They had come farther than he thought, due to the smoothness of the trail over which White Shadow was leading the expedition.

Under the trees the silent company halted in close formation. David could just make them out in the darkness, vague, shadowy forms, the outlines of the horses even more indistinct than those of their riders. For another hour they remained thus, exchanging no word. Through the close-spread foliage of the forest faint indications of dawn began

to appear. Still the waiting horsemen continued to hold their position. With the first wan light of day David made a discovery. He located their position as being only a few hundred yards south of the camp. He was more puzzled than ever at his strange adventure. Still he had faith in White Shadow. No one could look squarely into that high, open countenance and doubt the Indian's integrity.

The soft twitter of awakened forest birds slightly relieved the tensity of silence which overhung all. David glanced wistfully in the direction of the camp. What would his friends say if they could see him at that particular moment?

His musings came to an abrupt end. On the still morning air burst the clear, sharp report of a rifle. Half a dozen more reports followed in rattling succession. A kind of sighing wave passed over the waiting horsemen. White Shadow's right arm shot up in purposeful signal. "You follow me," he directed David. Away he cantered, in and out among the trees. His men swept after him, uttering wild, piercing yells. David felt the morning breeze rush in his face as he sped along on Silverheels.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Attack

THE succession of weird screams which floated down to the Long Trail Boys from the heights reduced them to speechless silence for a moment or two. When they finally ceased the party about the campfire found the ensuing hush positively eerie. Even Norton, with all his woodman's experience, could offer no adequate explanation regarding their origin.

"I never heard man or beast yell like that," he said. "I don't take an ounce of stock in ghosts, but that racket's outside anything human."

"The spirits don't like us," observed George comically. "They have it in for us. Glad I didn't have to hear *that* serenade by my lonesome."

Tony smiled wisely in the gloom. "I have heard that before," he announced quietly. "Once I am alone on the range with the large flock of sheep. When I am almost asleep I hear this bad noise. It keeps up, long time.

I am a little afraid, for I am younger then. I can't go away—leave the sheep. No; I must stay. So I do. Nothing bad happens to me. I stay awake for a while, but don't hear more. Nor never I hear again in the next years. To-night is the first time it comes again. This time I have not the fear. Some man makes that noise, I think. Why? How? I don't know."

"Humph!" ejaculated Craig. "Undoubtedly you are right, Antonio. Since you have heard it out on a sheep range, we can't lay it to any phenomenon up here. There are splits and openings in the rocks sometimes through which one can shout and make terrifying sounds. I thought of that as a possible explanation."

"Well, the concert seems to be over," Norton remarked after they had discussed the mystery a little further. "Better get a wink or two of sleep, you youngsters. We'll move from here with the light."

"Go and pound your own ear, Mr. Guide," Hal returned laughingly. "Kent and I are going to do the watchman act. You've done more than your share of it, you and Mr. Craig."

After energetic persuasion, Hal had his way, and the camp turned in with the two

boys on guard duty. Much pleased with their detail, the volunteer watchmen threw themselves down a few yards from the lean-to and conversed in low tones. Neither was in the least sleepy, though they agreed that Hal should lie down and try to sleep from one until three. From that time until dawn Kent was to rest.

When three o'clock arrived Kent was ready to snatch a little sleep. He had not begun to feel drowsy until about half-past two, then his eyelids had grown a trifle heavy.

It seemed to him he had slept not more than five minutes when he opened his eyes to find Hal shaking him energetically. In the same instant he heard the crack, crack! of rifles.

"What—?" he started to cry out, springing to his feet.

"Yes—*what?*" Hal was calmly examining his own rifle. "You sleep like a dead one. What do *you* make of that?" He jerked his head toward the sounds of firing.

"I don't know." Kent had seized his rifle which lay beside him. Two or three bullets whined past him as he stood there.

"Get back here!" It was Norton's voice shouting at them. "You're right in line to get drilled full of holes!"

"No porous appearance for mine," Hal remarked coolly as he backed toward the lean-to, his eyes searching the forest in the direction from whence the shots had come. Kent followed suit.

"This is a real attack and no mistake," declared Norton. "Those outlaws have brought their gang here to shoot us up. No telling how many of 'em there are. You have a right to defend yourselves, boys. Go to it."

"Will we?" came in chorus from his companions. The resolute gleam in every pair of eyes meant business. An enemy who showed himself would get short shrift from that quarter.

The shots had come from a thicket of intertwining bushes and stunted trees southeast of camp. Suddenly the new-fledged dawn was turned into a pandemonium of discordant yells. A fresh fusillade of rifle shots added to the din. Bullets ceased to shower in the direction of the camp. Still the firing to the southeast of the Long Trail Boys increased instead of diminishing.

"What do you suppose has broken loose?" cried out Hal to the guide. "There's some kind of pitched battle going on that we don't figure in at all. Those are Indian war-whoops.

No mistake about that. You remember Kent saw a bunch of Indians ride out of the secret valley. They must have been hiding in this vicinity ever since then."

"I reckon we're just plain lucky," Norton shouted back. "The Indians Kent saw must have had a grudge against the gang that was after us. They've followed 'em up to fight 'em."

"Don't believe White Shadow's with 'em!" yelled Hal. "Kent saw him go into the valley long after the gang of Indians had gone. Whoever they are, they stole our scrap. I was just getting ready to be a hero. Now my chance has vamoosed."

"You may be glad of it," Hartwell Craig returned rather severely. "No telling how many of those ruffians had gathered to shoot us up. The way they opened fire on us shows they had no regard for life. They intended cold-blooded murder."

"And all because you wouldn't hand David over to that tough who claims to be his uncle!" Kent's voice expressed his opinion of such high-handedness.

"There's more than that to it," disagreed the Nevada hermit with a shake of his head. "That half-breed's mixed up in this fight, too.

A half-breed never knows which he hates most, a white or an Indian."

During this exchange of comments at top voice the shooting had gone briskly on. The little band of defenders had gathered behind the lean-to. Here they were fairly well screened by several huge-trunked trees.

"*Mi madre!*" Tony exclaimed in alarmed recollection. "The ponies! I go to see to these! Some may be dead now from the bullets. Why I don't think when first come the shots?"

Before anyone could stop him he had raced away from the partial shelter to where the ponies and burros were picketed. So unexpected had been the attack no thought had been given to the animals. He returned shortly, his face full of trouble.

"*Ay de mi!*" He threw up his arms in an eloquently Spanish gesture. "*Gone;* all are gone!" He continued with a tirade in Spanish against the thieves.

"*Gone!*" echoed a concert of five voices. Deep consternation looked from every face.

"We might have expected it," Norton cried out bitterly, disgusted with his own lack of forethought in not promptly seeing to the safety of their mounts. "Blame me for this. I should have—"

"Ready with your guns!" It was Craig who interrupted. From the south he had picked up a horseman coming toward them at a gallop. "If he fires one shot at us, fire back at him. One at a time, I mean. For every bullet he fires, send one in return; beginning on the left with myself." The ranchman covered the rider as well as was possible with the latter's horse dodging in and out among the trees.

The oncoming horseman made no effort to do any shooting. Instead he bore down on the group, frantically waving his right arm and yelling lustily.

"Hi-yi-yi! Whoop! Ya-ya-ya!" Hal appeared to have taken sudden leave of his sober senses. He made a wild plunge forward for the rider, shouting: "It's David—lost, strayed or stolen David! Look who he's riding! *My pony, Silverheels!*"

CHAPTER XIX

Face to Face

"IT'S all over, and we won!" were David's mystifying words as he made a flying leap from Silverheels' back and landed in the middle of the amazed group.

"Who won? Where did you come from? Where've you been? What's going on down there?" were hurled at David from all sides.

"White Shadow won. I left him just now. I've been traveling with him since last night. We've been waiting since before daylight for that fight to come off. I had to sit Silverheels and watch it. White Shadow wouldn't give me a rifle. They got all they wanted and more, too. Metanzo's dead, and old John Whitney is wounded." David poured this forth rapidly. He was laboring under great excitement.

From below them the sound of firing had ceased. A stillness that hurt the ears now lay upon the forest.

"Go back from the time you shook the camp and tell us what happened to you. Then

maybe we can get at the rights of this business." The guide's voice broke calmly upon excited question and reply.

David complied, telling his own part of the adventure. "I don't know yet what it's all about, except that White Shadow knew those fellows were going to jump our camp and hustled here to help us," he concluded. "He sent me on ahead and said he would be over here after a while."

"That's the best news I've heard in a long time!" exclaimed Norton. "That means we shall find out most of what we haven't understood."

"Were any of White Shadow's boys hurt or killed?" asked Hal.

"Yes." A shadow crossed David's face. "Two killed. Three men wounded, but their wounds aren't serious. About half the other gang got through. There were between thirty and forty of them."

Too greatly wrought-up to care about breakfast, his comrades continued to ply David with questions as they stood about awaiting the arrival of White Shadow. In less than an hour after David's return White Shadow appeared. Nor was he alone. Kent turned red to his ears, looking highly abashed

to see the "mummy" marching stolidly along beside his grandson.

"How?" White Shadow saluted. His eyes falling upon Norton, his features relaxed in pleased wonder. "The little Father!" he said joyfully, and wrung hard the hand Norton shot forth to him.

"Well, well, well! I'm glad to meet you again. And I never knew your name. We were comrades once for a week in a big snow storm up in Oregon," he explained to the others. He presented them to White Shadow and his companion with due formality.

In the meantime the old chief had fastened an unwinking gaze upon Kent that made him feel like wriggling. It was all he could do to return it with indifference. "He'll never forgive me for the way I upset him and his dignity," was Kent's reflection.

"Smart boy! Good." To Kent's stupefaction the "mummy" grunted out these compliments and held forth a long claw-like hand.

"I—I'm glad I didn't hurt you. I had to get away." Kent stammered as he took the proffered claw and shook it warmly. "You are a great chief. I—well—I'm only a tenderfoot."

The old man appeared to understand this.

His hard, glittering black eyes softened. His parchment-like face wrinkled into a brief smile.

"Good words. Young brave," he said.

Long afterward Kent cherished the ancient's praise as the highest he might ever expect to receive.

"My little Father," White Shadow presently said, "yonder with my men is the white man. His leg shot; no walk. His business I know. This boy he want." He indicated David. "You want talk with him; we bring you to him."

"Do I want to talk to him?" repeated Norton grimly. "I rather guess I do. So does Mr. Craig, White Shadow."

"Oh, shucks! Why can't we all go and have a look at this celebrity?" Hal inquired in an injured tone. "Don't be stingy with your bad men, White Shadow."

The Indian bent a peculiar glance on Hal, then he smiled in a gravely beautiful fashion. Hal's flippant speech evidently amused him. "Come," he consented.

Thus it was the whole party followed White Shadow's lead to the spot where the main body of his braves stood guard over a score of villainous looking fellows; whites, low caste Mexicans and ill-favored Indians. On the

ground lay the man who had visited the camp in company with the half-breed and the supposed sheriff. He thrashed about, groaning and cursing volubly. Nor did the sight of the newcomers improve his temper or language.

Norton stared at him in bitter contempt, then said: "It's a long time since you and I met, isn't it, John Whitney? You are the man who was supposed to have been killed by your brother. You miserable hound. You let David Whitney bear a weight of shame and suffering that never belonged to him."

"Yes, I did. I'm not sorry," snarled the other. "What was the matter that he didn't come up and face the music?"

"Because he knew your gang would frame him," retorted Norton.

"You're right they would have. Two of us followed him all the way east on purpose to croak him. Pneumonia got him 'fore we did. He croaked in a hospital in Buffalo. He left me everything he had."

"*That's not true.* He wouldn't have left you a copper. I'm here to get the truth, though, and I intend to have it," Norton announced with stern purpose. "David is my nephew. He will never even speak to you again. You let my sister's boy drag himself

up as best he might with no encouragement except harsh words and blows. Now you'll answer for it. David's father was a rich man. What have you done with his money? I'll wager you managed to get it into your thieving hands. You never were any good from the start."

"You'll never know one word of David Whitney's affairs from me," sneered the recumbent man, his lower jaw setting obstinately.

"You don't talk true to the little Father, you stay here," White Shadow now took a hand in matters. "No eat; nothing. Stay here long while, mebbe, then go to jail. I am this." He raised a flap, which covered a pocket on the left side of his hunting shirt, disclosing a plain metal insignia. "I am special aide the government," he quietly declared to the amazed group. "My braves work for government, too. I am the chief all this." His arm swept wide over the surrounding landscape.

"*Good night!*" ejaculated the wounded belligerent. "I'm done brown. No show for me. What do I care about keeping Dave's affairs secret? If you want to know it," he said venomously, now addressing Norton, "I spent every cent of Dave's money. His

lawyer and I divvied up on it. I kept the kid with me so he'd never get busy outside and get hep to what we did. His father left it to him with you for his guardian. I had it fixed to make me his guardian. What do I get, you Indian there, for playing straight at the last?"

White Shadow did not deign to reply to this modest question. He stood like a statue while Norton further interrogated the desperado.

"I'm satisfied I've got the truth from him," the guide finally assured Craig. "Poor David, to be so cheated of what was his by right. Never mind, boy," he turned to David, who had been a sombre listener to the whole interview. "I'll make up the past to you. I have more than enough for us both. When this scoundrel is safe in jail I'll get a signed, written statement from him. I don't really need it. I have witnesses enough to his confession."

Leaving the captured criminal to the watchfulness of the stoical guard, the party, including White Shadow and Agunta, for such was the old chief's name, returned to the Long Trail Boys' camp. Here White Shadow further enlightened them.

"The white man—*malo*. He is killer. He mad, kill quick, no reason. He is not in the mountains before you. Come after, mebbe for the boy; mebbe for Metanzo. He know Metanzo, long time."

"I think he got track of me at High Ledge and followed me from there," broke in David. "He and his gang probably trailed us all the way up the mountains."

"But what was this half-breed Metanzo ranging the mountains for?" asked the guide. "He must have had an axe of his own to grind."

"We didn't know him from the side of a barn. Why was he so crazy to shoot us up?" demanded Hal resentfully. "It couldn't have been entirely on David's account."

"Metanzo is dead. I am glad. Since I am papoose Matanzo and I are enemies. He know I am the friend of Brent, the father, and his son. His friends my friends. So he hate you. He want know the secret these mountains. He can't. He try kill me, my braves. Then he can stay here; try find." White Shadow paused dramatically. "It is for him, *nunca* [never]. For Agunta, my father's father, for me, my braves, is the secret. What ours, given us, we keep.

When the smoke of the peace pipe blows in Agunta's valley, then we sit at the council fire, *para siempre* [for always]. Then I tell you *muchos cosas* [many things]. The trail of the Yaqui is long. It is from the Mejico to Agunta's valley. It is the white trail and good. No snakes coil upon it."

CHAPTER XX

Laying the Last Ghost

WITH this explanation the Long Trail Boys had to be content. White Shadow promptly veered from dramatic mystery to intense practicality. He proposed that the party should take the trail for the secret valley with himself and Agunta. His comrades would make it their business to start at once down the mountain with their prisoners. They would stop only long enough to bury the dead desperadoes. It would take two or three days to reach a town where the living offenders might be securely locked up to await trial. The two Indians of White Shadow's company would be taken to the valley for burial by four comrades.

Needless to say, the chief's proposal was accepted with alacrity. They were all eager to pass under the waterfall and set foot in Agunta's secret domain, which Kent had fancifully named Emerald Valley. David had already informed his relieved companions that the ponies and burros were safe. Silently

as wraiths, White Shadow's men had swooped down on them when the unearthly screeching, still a mystery to them, was going on. They had done so to save them from Metanzo, who would undoubtedly have run them off for the use of his own men, who had few mounts.

White Shadow piloted them along a broad, smooth trail which led to within a mile of the waterfall. There they turned into another trail, not quite so good. Then they struck a deep canyon with a grassy bed where the water trickled over moss-covered stones. Finally they passed through a magnificent natural archway into the short canyon of the waterfall.

There was one thing in particular which had been bothering Kent actively since White Shadow had joined the party. He burned to know why he had been taken prisoner and carried off to the valley. Thus far he had not gathered up the courage to ask White Shadow. As for Agunta, Kent stood in even more awe of him, though he had shown temporary disrespect for the old man's precious person.

It was not until they had passed under the fall and emerged from the passage into the brilliant sunshine of the beautiful valley that

Kent's opportunity for inquiry came. Just as they cleared the undergrowth and rode free into the valley, Kent found his pony neck and neck with White Shadow's splendid horse.

"Why did your grandfather keep me here?" he blurted out. "*You* wouldn't have let them rope me like a steer and bring me here."

White Shadow's austere features broke into the broadest smile Kent had seen him display since meeting him.

"That the fault Agunta," he answered. "When he hear you and friends come to the mountains, very mad. He say, 'Whites bad, never good.' He don't tell me, but he say my men: 'You find one these whites, you catch, bring me. I find what want.' My men tell me nothing. He is very great chief. They do his will. They don't want, but say each other, 'Must do. It will of Agunta.' When I come here, Agunta mad for the trick you play. Then I laugh. He laugh, too. He is the great chief, but also the old man. Sometimes like child."

"I see," Kent laughed a little as he contemplated the extreme tameness of his capture after all. Nevertheless he had not gone through being lassoed, imprisoned and escap-

ing without some of the thrills which would have attended a capture in earlier, more dangerous days.

The moment the riders drew up in front of Agunta's shack and dismounted, Norton and Tony began overhauling the burro's packs. No breakfast and a fairly long ride on empty stomachs meant overwhelming appetites for a square meal. Nothing could have pleased old Agunta better. Like Shy Beaver, he had a childish fondness for "eats." Instead of retiring in state to his shack, he hovered about while the unpacking went on. Half in a spirit of mischief, Hal offered him a box of chocolate-covered crackers. To the former's secret delight the old chief accepted them with dignity, but scuttled for the shack at a most undignified rate of speed, there to devour them.

It was close to five o'clock in the afternoon when Hal, Tony and Kent, the cooks, intoned a lusty chorus of "Come and get it," banging on their iron frying pan with spoons. After a most satisfying meal of canned salmon, bacon, hot biscuits, tinned baked beans, fruit cake, crackers and coffee, the diners sat lazily about in a half circle on the warm, dry earth. The cooks had laid themselves out to please

their distinguished guests, the fruit cake being a special mark of favor.

Presently White Shadow rose and left the company, returning with a long, beautifully carved peace pipe. In silence he handed it to Agunta, who carefully lighted it. He took a few puffs at it, then passed it to Kent, who was seated next to him. Though none of the Long Trail Boys were smokers, not one of them would have refused the peace pipe. Kent took three puffs, tried hard to stifle a cough and succeeded, passed it to Norton, who was an inveterate pipe smoker. Thus the curious Indian custom went its round until the pipe found Agunta again.

He found it and returned it to his lips with evident pleasure. "Tell our brothers what we carry in our hearts, son of my son," he commanded.

"Many hundred moons back," stated White Shadow, "come to this valley one priest. He find way behind the water. He look long time before find. He is sick and afraid some Indians find him sick, kill him. He bring with him, one Yaqui boy. This boy, Agunta. This valley belong, three lives before the priest, to the Spaniard, Francisco La Vida. He leave paper, say, 'I give valley priests of

San Sebastian.' Never these priests go the valley through three lives. The paper stay in mission long time, then this priest find. He go see. Find many bad Indians, have much trouble. Him is sick at last to die. He give Agunta this paper, say 'All is for you. This valley has the rich silver. You keep. Help your brothers, the Yaqui.' So Agunta keep. He live all alone here till he is the young brave. He hear men talk he go sometimes to village far from valley. He find he must make the claim for himself. He stake and say 'This twice mine.'

"He think no one find anyhow. He get tire live alone. Go back to Mejico, find the wife. He learn how take the silver the priest show him from mine. Then wife die. He has one son, ten years. That my father. He take my father to this valley. They live here, my father is the young brave. They go home with much silver. Always they give most the Yaqui who are very poor but good. My father marry the very beautiful Indian girl. Live here. I am born here. My mother die here, when the winter is too cold. Bad winter. My father is killed by falling tree. So Agunta and I live here a little; there a little. Agunta is often in Mejico. We have

the great school there. We pay the money teach the Yaqui, help them; some other Indians, too. Long time ago we speak your government. Our claim is good. We are naturalized and I am made the secret Indian service in Nevada. This our country; it help us. Mejico no help us. We don't help Mejico, but our people. They suffer too much in Mejico.

"Metanzo find long time back we have silver mine. So he follow us, try find, then kill us. He is old as my father. Always *malo* [bad]. This man the little Father hate knows we have the mine from Metanzo. He think to help Metanzo kill us, then Metanzo help him kill you. Now they will be no more. This man hang, mebbe. He is killer. We can prove. Many the others hang, too."

"It sounds like a regular story of adventure, and yet some of it actually happened to us. Now that our troubles are over and the villainous villains are all either dead or soon going to be, take us to see your silver mine. Will you, please, O great chief, White Shadow?" It was Hal who made this audacious request.

"It will be," promised White Shadow earnestly. "You stay here while. We hunt, fish, be happy. I show many new things."

"We'll be glad to do that," Norton said heartily. "We've had such an unsettled time so far, I'd like to stick in a place like this valley for a spell."

"I am with you," seconded Hartwell Craig. The Long Trail Boys expressed their approbation by a mighty cheer, greatly to Agunta's pleasure.

"There is just one more thing to know," Tony spoke suddenly after the cheering had died out. "Last night we heard the terrible noise. Once I heard it on the sheep range. It was the same screaming. You know what this is?" he questioned White Shadow.

For answer the Indian took from a pocket an object and laid it open to inspection in the palm of his hand. It was a curiously wrought whistle, hand made. It was divided into three pipes, though carved from one piece of wood. In appearance it resembled a large sized tuning fork. Raising it to his lips he blew three separate blasts; one through each pipe. Upon the still evening air burst the horrifying sounds they had heard on the previous evening.

"It is old, so old. I don't know how old. It is of Aztec, the very old Mejicano. Same is this." He touched the feathered ornament

he still wore in his hair. "This, too." He pointed to Hal's talisman, which had been returned to Hal by David. "I blow the whistle scare Metanzo. He think it the bad spirits. Once I hear I walk the range three men say make trouble for you. Kill mebbe, steal many sheep. I am near you that night. I fight for you, you need. You are but the *niño* [young boy]. I blow whistle for fun. These men scared. Run; never come back."

"And that lays the last ghost. From now on, it's us for a good time. Shy Beaver said you would fight the bad spirits all by yourself and chase 'em. Well, you certainly have." Hal beamed his admiration of White Shadow and his methods.

"It's only the beginning of the long, long trail for us," David commented, a new light in his dark eyes, his face animated.

"I'd hate to think this the only trip we'd ever go on together. We're a pretty fine bunch, all things considered." Kent grinned teasingly at his comrades.

"Oh, don't praise me too much. I'm not used to it!" George pretended to hide an unblushing face in one tanned hand.

"Nobody said anything special about *you*," cruelly reminded Hal. "Still, if you feel that

way, I won't hurt your honest pride in yourself."

"Wait till you get through with this trip before you begin planning another one," advised the ranchman. Nevertheless he took a renewed youthful pleasure in contemplating the possibilities of another trip with these lively lads when next summer should roll around. "How about you, Norton?"

"Well, I've a nephew to look after now.. If he wants to go on a trip next summer with the boys here, guess I'll have to make my arrangements to go, too."

"There you are!" Hal triumphantly called out. "Once you join this outfit, you're in it for life. I know already where we're going next summer. We're going up to Oregon and do the big woods. Are we? Well, rather! Contrary? No one's saying a word. Carried. It's us for the tall, tall forests. We've learned the secret of these mountains, maybe we'll find a rip-snorting mystery way up in the Oregon timber belt."

What strange and eventful happenings befell the Long Trail Boys in Oregon will be told in "The Long Trail Boys and the Gray Cloaks, A Mystery Story of the Oregon Forests."

THE END